A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE RUSSO-SOVIET *ANEKDOT*

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This is a study of the cultural significance and generic specificity of the Russo-Soviet joke (in Russian, *anekdot* [pl. *anekdoty*]). My work departs from previous analyses by locating the genre's quintessence not in its formal properties, thematic taxonomy, or structural evolution, but in the essential links and productive contradictions between the *anekdot* and other texts and genres of Russo-Soviet culture. The *anekdot*'s defining intertextuality is prominent across a broad range of cycles, including those based on popular film and television narratives, political *anekdoty*, and other cycles that draw on more abstract discursive material. Central to my analysis is the genre's capacity for reflexivity in various senses, including generic self-reference (*anekdoty* about *anekdoty*), ethnic self-reference (*anekdoty* about Russians and Russian-ness), and critical reference to the nature and practice of verbal signification in more or less implicit ways.

The analytical and theoretical emphasis of the dissertation is on the years 1961—86, incorporating the Stagnation period plus additional years that are significant in the genre's history. That quarter-century span in the USSR saw not only the coagulation of a way of life that provided ample fodder for oral satire, but also the appearance of a series of texts that provided source material for the topical *anekdot* cycles that to this day constitute a large portion of the Russian jokelore corpus. Before turning to the Soviet-period *anekdot*, I discuss the eighteenth-

and nineteenth-century distinction between the literary or historical *anekdot*—a written genre not reliant on humor and in which real-life people figured—and the traditional folk *anekdot*, an offshoot of the folktale. The twentieth-century *anekdot* represented a confluence of its folkloric and inscribed forebears, combining features of (and effectively superseding) both traditions. By the 1960s, the attributes and functions the genre had accrued over the course of its development began to resonate with the underlying tropes, conflicts, and values of the society to such a degree that the *anekdot* became a kind of "genre-laureate" of the age. The dissertation concludes with an examination of the post-censorship *anekdot*, and a contextualization of the genre in the larger cultural atmosphere of contemporary Russia.

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PREFACE

My teachers and mentors at Pitt—Nancy Condee, Helena Goscilo, Vladimir Padunov, David Birnbaum, Jane Harris, Mark Altshuller, Elena Dryzhakova, and Mark Lipovetsky—have uniformly treated me and my fellow graduate students as much as junior colleagues as students, and I'll always be in their debt for their unflagging professional and personal encouragement. I owe special thanks to Colin MacCabe for agreeing to join my committee at a very late date, and for making thoughtful and pertinent comments nevertheless. Parts of this thesis have also benefited from careful readings by Moya Luckett, Valery Belyanin, Emil Draitser, and Donald Barton Johnson.

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

> Laughter is an awesome force, a mark of optimism, a symptom of mental health.
> —Leonid Brezhnev[1]
>
> When people throw excrement at one another whenever they meet, either verbally or actually, can this be interpreted as a case of wit, or merely written down as a case of throwing excrement? This is the central problem of all interpretation.
> —Mary Douglas[2]

The Russian word *anekdot* (pl. *anekdoty*), borrowed from French (*l'anecdote*) in the mid-eighteenth century, has had since the early-twentieth century a primary connotation similar to that of the word "joke" in the Anglophone West: an exceptionally productive form of oral culture consisting of a brief, terminally humorous narrative and/or dialogue.[3] *Anekdoty* are fictional, formulaic, of anonymous provenance, they tend to violate taboos, and they share with their Western counterpart(s) compositional features such as the punch line and an affinity for tripartite constructions. Although the *anekdot* and the joke share many attributes, however, the dissimilarity of their respective cultural environments makes the terms less synonymous than one

[1] *Malaia zemlia* 22. All translations of Russian-language sources are mine.

[2] "Jokes" 293.

[3] In what follows, I use the transliterated Russian word *anekdot* in most cases, although for stylistic reasons I often substitute "Russian joke" or "Soviet joke," or simply "joke" when the context makes it clear that I am referring to the Russo-Soviet genre. When discussing the connotations of the word *anekdot*'s etymological ancestors and counterparts in classical and Western-European culture, or in a general, international context, I use the English "anecdote."

might expect, even in the post-Soviet era (to say nothing of the geopolitically bipolar period that preceded it). In addition to expected differences in thematics and political significance, the *anekdot* and the joke diverge in subtler ways that have to do with the relationships of their respective cultures to oral discourse and, naturally, to humor.

Although I mention the Western joke here at the outset as a point of reference for non-Slavist readers, this dissertation is not comparative. That is, it is not a study of Russian humor's place in international jokelore, or how Russian *anekdoty* about Ukrainians differ from American jokes about Poles. The focus here is a different spectrum of parallelism and contrast: the essential links and productive contradictions between the *anekdot* and other constituent textual forms of Russo-Soviet culture. Anthropologist Mary Douglas wrote in 1975: "Joking as one mode of expression has yet to be interpreted in its total relation to other modes of expression" (291). Her statement is still largely valid today, almost three decades later. The present project does not pretend to fill the lacuna (studying anything in its "total relation" to other things is more a life's work than a doctoral thesis), but it is an attempt to take up Douglas's implicit challenge in the limited context of a particular culture and its jokes. And the jokes told in that culture—twentieth-century urban Russia—quite arguably achieved a status unmatched outside of those temporal and geographical boundaries.

My study of the cultural significance and generic specificity of the *anekdot* departs from previous analyses by locating the *anekdot*'s generic quintessence not in its formal properties, thematic taxonomy, or structural evolution, but in the nature of its multifarious relationship with other forms of expression. The particular ways in which *anekdoty* articulates the changing values, moods, and conflicts of the society—as jokes everywhere do—are inseparable from that relationship. Accordingly, the materials relevant to my study include not only a corpus of

anekdoty representing the genre's major thematic cycles and compositional models,[4] but also official and unofficial sources from the Soviet era and beyond (in both directions) that engage—or have been engaged by—the *anekdot*: oral narratives and written memoirs, journalism, prose fiction, poetry, song lyrics, slogans, proverbs, tales, films, television programs, encyclopedia and dictionary entries, arrest information, legal statutes, Party programs and resolutions, statements by government officials, and state-published (i.e., non-oral) *anekdoty*.

While the central argument of the dissertation is framed by discussions of the *anekdot*'s pre-Stalin (including pre-Soviet) and post-Gorbachev incarnations, most of the texts I analyze date from the period between the rigidification of Soviet cultural policy in the early 1930s and the end of Soviet censorship in the late 1980s. My analytical and theoretical emphasis, moreover, is on the years 1961-86, incorporating all of what is known as the Stagnation period of Soviet culture (the apogee of the *anekdot*'s popularity), plus additional years on each end that are significant in the history of the genre. That quarter-century span of history in the USSR saw not

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[4] The corpus on which this study is based (numbering between 2,000 and 3,000 *anekdoty*) includes: (1) *anekdoty* collected orally by me in Moscow and St. Petersburg in 1998 and 1999, and among native Russians in the U.S. between 1999 and 2003 [approximately 5—10 % of the entire corpus]; (2) *anekdoty* published in book collections, periodicals, or on the Internet (I list these sources in a separate bibliography); and (3) *anekdoty* collected by other scholars who have either published them or shared them with me. *Anekdoty* from published sources are so indicated with parenthetical citations; those with no such attribution were told to me orally.

The scholar of the *anekdot* faces a problem shared by all analysts of contemporary urban folklore: the integrity of the material. Many published Russian jokes are, from a scholarly perspective, suspect, as they are undated, often taken (without attribution) from other sources, and sometimes composed from scratch by the jokebook "compiler." Although I am not a folklorist, I am certainly aware of the need for authenticity and credibility in source texts, so in my choice of published *anekdoty* I have favored those found in multiple sources, in sources dating from the period I am discussing, or that I recall hearing orally but did not transcribe.

only the coagulation of a way of life (social, material, and intellectual) that provided ample fodder (and ample situational contexts and free time) for oral satire, but also the appearance of a series of texts that provided source material for the topical *anekdot* cycles that to this day constitute a large portion of the Russian jokelore corpus. Visual narrative texts were an especially rich source. El'dar Riazanov's 1962 film, *Gusarskaia ballada* [Hussar's Ballad] and Sergei Bondarchuk's 1965-67 adaptation of *Voina i mir* [War and Peace], for example, together spawned a cycle about a fictional nineteenth-century Russian ballroom lothario, Lt. Rzhevskii. Vitalii Mel'nikov's 1966 film, *Nachal'nik Chukotki* [Head of Chukotka] helped to inspire a cycle about the Chukchi, an ethnic group related to Eskimos that lives in the arctic, northeastern-most province of Russia. Shtirlits, the protagonist of Tat'iana Lioznova's 1973 television mini-series, *Semnadtsat' mgnovenii vesny* [Seventeen Moments of Spring] became the subject of an enormous cycle. Two animated series from the late 1960s and early 1970s—one featuring Vinni-Pukh and Piatachok (the Russian names of A. A. Milne's Winnie the Pooh and Piglet) (directed by Fedor Khitruk) and the other Gena the Crocodile and his furry, big-eared sidekick, Cheburashka (directed by Roman Kachanov)—generated large cycles still popular today. The last Soviet visual text to inspire a significant cycle was Igor' Maslennikov's 1979-86 series of television films based on Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories. The most famous cycle to come out of the *anekdot*'s golden age was the one that developed around the protagonists of Georgii and Sergei Vasil'evs' 1934 film, *Chapaev*, which was released during the Stalin period but enjoyed a renewed surge of popularity beginning with the celebration of its thirtieth anniversary in 1964, after which the film was frequently shown on television and in children's matinees (Alaev 120).

The prominence of cycles based on films and television programs testifies to a crucial point that has not been sufficiently emphasized in studies of the genre: a large percentage of the Soviet Union's best-known *anekdoty* are most immediately based not on unmediated, abstract socio-political and historical concepts, or on real-life personalities or groups, or even on current events, but on the representations of these things in the mass media, and especially in the output of the Soviet culture industry. The *anekdot*'s intertextuality is not limited to cycles grounded in cultural texts, however. Many explicitly political *anekdoty* play off mass-media representations and specific examples of discourse in much the same way as the above-mentioned "aesthetic" cycles. The Lenin jokes of the early 1970s, for example, typically target not Lenin's political activities or policies, but the state's ambitious, hagiographic packaging of the 1970 Lenin centennial.[5] Brezhnev jokes, too, were inspired as often by the various composed mythologizations of the General Secretary's persona as by the policies and actions of his administration.[6] The very use of neo-mythological strategies of image-construction by the state was a frequent point of departure for the *anekdot*, which, as folklore, is itself a generic descendant of cultural myth and, therefore, predisposed to engagement with other such descendants on multiple levels. Multi-lateral intertextuality became the genre's *raison d'être*.

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[5] One of the best-known Lenin jokes is a list of commemorative souvenirs produced for the jubilee: talcum powder ("Lenin's ashes"), cologne ("Spirit of Lenin"), a triple-wide bed especially for newlyweds ("Lenin is always with us"), and condoms in the shape of the heads of Lenin himself ("Lenin in you") and his wife, Nadezhda Krupskaia ("Naden'-ka," a pun on the Russian diminutive for Nadezhda and a colloquial way to say "put it on!").

[6] One canonical example of the Brezhnev joke takes its cue from the frequently televised ceremonies at which he was decorated for his ongoing service to the country: "Что будет, если Брежнева проглотит крокодил? Он две недели будет срать орденами" ["What would happen if Brezhnev were eaten by a crocodile? The crocodile would be shitting medals for two weeks"].

1.1. MOZART AND SALIERI

The rampant intertextuality across the various categories of *anekdot* cycle (cultural, political, ethnic, sexual, etc.) is evidence of the genre's role as a medium for popular meta-discourse. The predominance of official texts in the corpus available for such intertextual engagement ensured that the *anekdot*'s chief referents would be examples of state-generated or state-approved discourse. In content, of course, the *anekdot* was almost invariably irreverent toward, or simply indifferent to, the prevailing ideology (and morality).[7] The cumulative model of Russo-Soviet history, society, and identity represented in official texts of all varieties provoked the growth of parallel models in response.[8] The *anekdot* corpus was one of the most comprehensive of those models. Its alternative representations of the Soviet experience, however, were not merely rebuttals of the progressively less compelling semantic premises of official ideology, but also ironic, stylized rehearsals and implicit exposés of the signifying practices used to communicate those premises. The *anekdot* was a vehicle for critical commentary on the ham-handed, proprietary attitude towards discourse exhibited by the state as a producer (and controller) of texts. The underlying premise of "*anekdot* culture" was that official discursive practice not only generated a huge body of defective utterances and images, but contaminated the very act of symbolic (especially verbal) expression itself as a category of human behavior.

Although folklorists and other scholars have addressed the question of the *anekdot*'s generic markers and historical roots (see the "Predecessors and Premises" section, below), the genre has not been properly contextualized synchronically, i.e., within the overall generic

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[7] Petrovskii discusses (though without examples) the fascinating phenomenon of the "conformist" (pro-Stalin) *anekdot*, which existed in the post-war years. In a footnote he also notes that there was even an underground Stalinist student group (48). Such examples illustrate the Stalinist state's determination to monopolize (by "nationalizing") all means of expression, regardless of content.

[8] See Yurchak, and Briker and Vishevskii on the notion of a "parallel" culture in the Soviet Union.

taxonomy of Russo-Soviet culture. Ol'ga Smolitskaia was on the mark when she wrote in 1996 that study of the *anekdot* was still in its "romantic stage," that compilers and analysts alike were still enamored of its "independent spirit" ("'Anekdoty o frantsuzakh'" 386). While the subsequent years have seen considerable improvement in the scholarly rigor of "*anekdot*-ology," there remains a wealth of material for interpretation.

Discussions of the genre, particularly by Western (including émigré) commentators, have frequently emphasized how political *anekdoty* heroically—if symbolically—challenged official Soviet ideology. In such views, *anekdoty* are considered significant insofar as their clandestine exchange enabled Soviet citizens to experience the psychological and moral pleasure produced by effecting what George Orwell famously called "tiny revolutions" (284).[9] Some give the *anekdot* a more direct political significance. Humor theorist Arthur Asa Berger, for example, writes of the *anekdot*'s agitational function in the defeat of Eastern-Bloc Communism: "[political jokes] destroy[ed] [people's] sense of obligation to the regime that [was] controlling them, so that when an opportunity [came] to overthrow the regime, there [was] a common desire to do so" ("The Politics of Laughter" 27). Zara Abdullaeva grants the *anekdot* an even more active propagandistic value:

> We can marvel at the extraordinary social role that the anecdote [sic] played [. . .] as it whittled away at the tragic and at the same time comic foundations of official ideology/mythology and bred in ironic Soviet man the pride of slaves who feel victorious when they recount their anecdotes [. . .]. That man's fate could depend on his right to anecdote is the discovery of Soviet civilization. ("Popular Culture" 235)

There is no question that the *anekdot* had a high ideological valence during the Soviet period. The history of persecution for *anekdot*-telling is a sufficient demonstration of this fact.

[9] Orwell's comment recalls the central premise of relief theories of humor, whose best-known proponent is Freud (see below).

Historian Roy Medvedev recently said in an interview that “about 200,000 people” served time in the gulag for *anekdot*-telling during the Stalin years, and that after amnesties began, following Stalin’s death, “the first telegram [. . .] sent to the camps” instructed camp administrators to free the joke-tellers first, since they had been prosecuted for the most minor offense (Medvedev). The statute in the Stalinist penal code under which (oral or written) reproduction of *anekdoty* was punishable was Article 58, which criminalized “anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda.” The statutorily enforced taboo applied not only to overtly political *anekdoty* (e.g., leader jokes), but to any that appeared to interpret satirically or irreverently the model of reality inscribed in state media and socialist-realist texts. The taboo applied even to so-called *bytovye anekdoty* [*anekdoty* about everyday life], a fact that testifies not only to the strong current of moralism in state ideology (most *bytovye anekdoty* are sexually themed), but also to official awareness of the disruptive potential of the genre as a category of expression, regardless of the content of individual instantiations of the form. Like a typewriter or a short-wave radio, the *anekdot* was a suspect apparatus to possess. As Iurii Sokolov has put it: “The logic involved was itself anecdotal: today you tell a dirty joke about Emma, tomorrow it’ll be a satirical one about the System” (94).[10]

While the vast majority of *anekdot*-related arrests dates from the Stalin period, there are accounts of official persecution (and sometimes prosecution) during the subsequent decades of Soviet power. In 1957, for example, there was a small wave of arrests for *anekdot*-telling.[11] Article 190 of the Brezhnev-era penal code allowed for up to three years imprisonment for

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[10] In the original Russian, Sokolov’s comment rhymes: “pro Emmu” – “pro Sistemu.”

[11] Aleksandr Belousov, personal communication, 20 June 1999. A more notorious spasm of cultural repressiveness occurred in the same year: the persecution of Boris Pasternak following the publication of *Doktor Zhivago* abroad.

"propagation of known falsehoods denigrating the Soviet system" (Abramenko 3). Smolitskaia relates an apocryphal account of a conference in the 1960s or 1970s at which a scholar damaged his own career, as well as those of the conference organizers, by daring to present a paper on the *anekdot*, complete with the following joke about the first Soviet cosmonaut, Iurii Gagarin:

> Дочка Гагарина отвечает по телефону: "Папа летает вокруг Земли и вернется в 19.00, а мама ушла по магазинам, и когда вернется – неизвестно". ("'Anekdoty o frantsuzakh'" 391)[12]

In 1983, just two years before Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, a 23-year-old Leningrad woman named Irina Tsurkova was sentenced to three years in prison for "systematic propagation in oral form of [. . .] *anekdoty* lampooning the activities of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union" (V. Bakhtin, "Anekdoty" 799).[13]

While it is clear why so many *anekdoty* were illegal under Soviet power, the *anekdot* represents a special case among the outlaw texts of Soviet culture; for much of Soviet history the state treated the entire genre as inherently anti-Soviet.[14] The official culture industry readily co-opted other folklore genres such as the folktale, the proverb,[15] and even the *chastushka* [a two- or

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[12] "Gagarin's young daughter answers the phone: 'Daddy's flying around the Earth and will be back today at 7:00 p.m., and Mommy went out to buy food, so there's no telling when she'll be home.'"

[13] The year 1983 also saw two prominent prosecutions of members of the creative intelligentsia: poet Irina Ratushinskaia (sentenced to seven years) and writer Leonid Borodin (ten years added to a previous sentence) (Kelly, "The Retreat from Dogmatism" 251).

[14] A similar logic of catch-all, punitive preemption informed Stalinist policies towards nationalities, several of which were forced into internal exile or otherwise persecuted *en masse* (the Chechens, for example, or colonies of Germans living inside the Soviet Union).

[15] The proverb lent itself especially well to mobilization by the state culture industry. In addition to its didactic potential, the genre's incapacity for reflexivity, writes Susan Stewart, is a major reason for its attractiveness to those aspiring to discursive hegemony: "In the space which the literature of play allows to be marked only with difference, the proverb chisels its univocal meaning. In this is the politics of the proverb, and the politics of any evaluation which cannot move back on itself" ("Some Riddles" 105). See

four-line humorous ditty], encouraging the composition of socialist-oriented "fakelore" and scholarly emphasis on politically progressive pre-revolutionary folk texts. The *anekdot*, however, did not yield so easily to ideological colonization and integration into the Soviet *Ars poetica*. The state tried, of course. Collections of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary and transcribed oral *anekdoty*,[16] as well as translations of *anekdoty* from other traditions (especially those of Central Asia and the Caucasus[17]), saw publication during the Soviet years, though in relatively small numbers. "Official" *anekdoty* were compositionally similar, only with state-approved content. Such establishment jokes appeared in periodicals such as *Krokodil*, as well as in joke books (usually translations into Russian of jokes by and/or about non-Russian nationalities), repertory guides for *estrada* [variety-stage] comedy, prose fiction, films, etc.

Unlike other genres, the "above-ground" variety of the *anekdot* was, predictably, no competition for the popular form. Even though short comic narratives and dialogues were published in official periodicals and books throughout the Soviet period, and after the death of Stalin were performed on the variety stage, at *kapustniki* [amateur, roast-like student talent shows], and in frequently televised humor competitions known as *KVN* [*Klub veselykh i*

Chapters Four and Five of this dissertation for my interpretation of reflexivity in the *anekdot*.

[16] See Krivoshlyk, for example. The best-known publication of transcribed folk *anekdoty* is to be found in Afanas'ev's *Narodnye Russkie skazki* [Russian Folktales, 1857-62], several editions of which were published during the Soviet period. I cite several of the *anekdoty* therein in Chapter One.

[17] Dolgopolova writes that only "Persian, Turkish, Arabic, and Latvian" *anekdoty* were published in the USSR ("The Contrary World" 2). The best-known of these were the anecdotal exploits of the legendary Central Asian trickster Khodzha Nasreddin. Abramenko reports that authentic contemporary *anekdot* motifs did occasionally find their way into print during the Soviet period, but that Soviet characters in them were typically renamed as foreigners—"Jeans, Pauls, and Smiths"—thus transforming domestic social satire into barbs directed at the capitalist West (4).

nakhodchivykh, “the club of the jolly and witty”],[18] they were almost never called *anekdoty*. Instead, they were labeled *shutki* [jests], *miniatiury* [miniatures], *khokhmy* [gags], *reprizy dlia klounov* [“quips for clowns”],[19] etc. So, when popular cynicism began to peak, it found potent expression in a satirical genre whose very name was anathema to official culture. A taboo-breaking act could be signaled by the mere announcement of the genre one was about to perform: “*Anekdot*!…”

One reason for the generic embargo, of course, was the state’s awareness that the *anekdot*’s diminutive size and oral nature made it an ideal medium for rapid, clandestine propagation of unvetted ideas and sentiments. The genre’s portability, and its status as taboo, were reflected in the typically private and/or marginal settings in which *anekdoty* were told: the holiday or party table; the apartment kitchen; stairwells, bathrooms, and other locations used as smoking or rest areas in workplaces and institutions of higher learning; train compartments; queues for goods or services[20]; lunch rooms or recess areas in primary and secondary schools;

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[18] See Iunisov for a historical and “mythopoetic” analysis of the comic stage tradition among Russo-Soviet students.

[19] The legendary comedian Iurii Nikulin, while serving as director of the Moscow Circus in the early 1980s, conducted a contest in which people would send in “quips for clowns.” Rumor has it that Nikulin later published many of the entries (which were in fact *anekdoty*) in his well-known perestroika-era column in the magazine *Ogonek* [Little Fire] and in a popular collection based on the column, *Anekdoty ot Nikulina* (Aleksandr Belousov, personal communication, June 1999).

[20] This item on the list may appear anomalous, since queues are not private, but it was mentioned by several informants as a typical setting for *anekdot*-telling during Stagnation. The telling of *anekdoty* in such a setting indicates the socio-political differences between that period and the Stalin period, and the extent to which an ironic, satirical worldview characterized public opinion during Stagnation. Note also that food lines are analogous to the traditional marketplace, which Mikhail Bakhtin identifies as a key site for popular use of the “carnival idiom” (*Rabelais* 17).

the *bania* [bathhouse]; and drinking spots such as *pivnye bary* [beer bars] or outdoor areas where men would gather *na troikh* ["in threes"] to drink vodka.

Unlike the *chastushka*, which shares the *anekdot*'s brevity and satirical potential[21] but is rhymed and usually sung, the *anekdot* blends easily into conversation; it is both an aesthetic composition and a form of speech, and thus an "organic" example of the art-life link to which Soviet cultural engineers aspired. The *anekdot* was ambiguous in other ways, too. Because of its traditional role as a medium for popular irreverence towards elites, the *anekdot*'s "class origins" were simultaneously impeccable and suspect. Although its pre-revolutionary value in mocking priests and landowners was clear, its utility as a contemporary, productive genre was problematic, considering the current ruling "class." One humor theorist describes satire as a natural by-product of a social situation in which "the intelligentsia has long recognized the inherent emptiness, absurdity, and cultural abnormality of the ruling class, and considers that class's claims on the power to lead society to be inherently unjustified and therefore ridiculous." Although this reads like a post-Soviet or émigré description of the premise behind the Stagnation-era underground *anekdot*, it is in fact Soviet Commissar of Enlightenment Anatolii Lunacharskii's characterization of the revolutionary proletariat's satirical impulse, and was published in the early-1930s, the very end of a period of active debate over the place of satire in the Revolution (9).

The *anekdot* represented a combination of medium and mode that proved particularly tricky to conscript into the army of cultural forms mobilized in the service of the Revolution. As popular, oral satire, the *anekdot* was difficult to reconcile with the official view of contemporary folklore as the organic expression of the Soviet People's gratitude for and contentment in the

[21] Collections of ideologically irreverent *chastushki* are plentiful. See Volkov, for example.

new world (Maksim Gor'kii himself wrote that “pessimism is entirely alien to folklore” [503, qtd. in Sidel'nikov, “Ideino-khudozhestvennaia spetsifika” 22]). Beginning with the consolidation of Stalinist cultural policy in the 1930s, humor and satire, as modes of expression, were increasingly assigned to the realm of professional, not explicitly folkloric, art forms (film, literature, theater). Moreover, professional comic texts were dominated by examples of non-satirical humor (“recreational drollery,” to use Mikhail Bakhtin’s apt term [*Rabelais* 12]). During the ascendancy of Stalinism (and less so after its demise) the state encouraged, or tolerated, the use of satire only when a common enemy was officially identified (NEPmen, Trotskyites, Hitler, capitalism, corrupt bureaucrats, etc.). When it was allowed, satire of domestic phenomena and personalities was severely limited. A Soviet émigré wrote in 1932 that that the “arrows” of official Soviet satire did not reach higher than “the secretary of a factory Party cell,” that above that level there was a strict taboo on satirizing officials (Azov 2, qtd. in Iangirov 156). The satirical newspaper *Krokodil* (founded in 1922) initially published domestically directed barbs (at stupid bureaucrats, for example), but by the 1930s it was completely under the aegis of *Pravda*, and its satire was directed almost exclusively towards the capitalist West (Larsen 81).

It was not simply the *anekdot*’s politically incorrect thematics that were anathema to the establishment, but its very form, mood, and means of circulation. The anonymous nature of *anekdot* genesis proved a particular irritation to the state. A 1982 article in the newspaper *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* [Communist-Youth-League Truth] speculates about the personality of the faceless, nameless composers of *anekdoty* (specifically, of Chapaev jokes):

> Не будем гадать, какие причины движут теми, кто [. . .] сочиняет пошлые анекдоты о любимом нами с детства герое гражданской войны. Автор их всегда анонимен. Зато внутренний его облик проглядывает из таких анекдотцев достаточно различимо: жалкая, гнилая душонка, сознающая

> свою ущербность, лишенная чувства ответственности и стремящаяся если не погубить, то хотя бы унизить, размыть и опоганить это чувство у других [. . .]. Гражданская инфантильность, идейная незрелость, политическая наивность – вот та питательная среда, на котором произрастают чертополохом подобные сорняки нашей словесности [. . .]. Именно с такого, незначительного, казалось бы отступления от своих принципов начинается нередко история всякого душевного краха [. . .].
>
> Сегодня антисоветские центры на Западе выпускают сборники собранных по подворотням, а большей частью состряпанных ими же анекдотов, призванных опорочить нашу страну и ее героев. Очевидно, им тоже не по душе, когда наши мальчики играют в Чапаева или Матросова, им очень хотелось бы лишить советскую молодежь ее героических идеалов [. . .]. Война идей отзывается эхо не только на страницах газет или в спорах философов. Фронт ее пролегает через и сердце каждого человека. (Nerush and Pavlov 4)[22]

Considering the ideology's affinity both for folkloric patterns of representation and militarism (literal and metaphorical: note the "war of ideas" referred to at the end of the article cited above), it should come as no surprise that there was official interest in humor, including oral humor, early in the state's history. Soviet cultural leaders sought to harness humor (like all other modes of discourse) to the interests of the Revolution. In the 1920s, when Moscow was inundated by *anekdoty*, there was even a proposal to designate the genre an official form of self-criticism in

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[22] "We will not speculate as to what motivates those who compose vulgar *anekdoty* about the Civil War hero whom we have loved since childhood. Their author is always anonymous. But his interior aspect shows through such *anekdoty* rather clearly: a pathetic, rotten little soul who is aware of his own damaged nature and lack of any sense of responsibility, and who is bent on destroying, or at least debasing, eroding, and defiling, that sense in others [. . .]. Civic infantilism, mental immaturity, and political naïveté: those are the sources of nourishment for the weeds that grow like thistles in our verbal culture [. . .]. Often a mental collapse begins with just such a seemingly insignificant departure from one's principles [. . .]. Today, anti-Soviet centers in the West are putting out collections of *anekdoty* gathered from the gutter or, more commonly, scribbled by them. These *anekdoty* are slanderous to our country and its heroes. It is obvious that they don't like it in the West when our boys play Chapaev or Matrosov [heroic WWII fighter pilot. –SG]. They would very much like to deprive the Soviet youth of its heroic ideals [. . .]. The war of ideas finds resonance not only in the pages of newspapers or in the debates of philosophers. The front of that war runs through the heart of every person."

Bolshevik culture (Alaev 52). The Bolsheviks admired the *anekdot*'s agitational potential and especially its capacity to spread rapidly. In a 1927 article in *Novyi lef* [New Left], V. Pertsov refers to the *anekdot* in botanical terms: "A gust of wind, the seeds are spread like dandelion fluff, and the *anekdot* is instantly planted in tens of thousands of heads at once" (41).

In fact, the *anekdot*'s characteristic patterns of propagation and consumption impeccably exemplified state fantasies of popular culture and its role in Soviet society. In a scene near the end of Grigorii Aleksandrov's 1938 film musical *Volga-Volga*, for example, the title of peasant-heroine Strelka's "Song of the Volga" becomes literalized when a storm blows the sheet music (which is apparently written on waterproof paper) off a ship and into the Volga river. By the next day, the song is on the lips (or instruments) of everyone Strelka meets downstream, in various individual performances that nevertheless retain the spirit of the original, thus demonstrating the universal appeal of true folk creativity, and the people's unanimous and unambiguous receptivity to it. That the *anekdot* accomplished the same, only in reality, indicates that it was not only an efficient vehicle for parody; its very existence exposed state cultural models themselves as unwitting self-parodies. The *anekdot* represented a threat and an affront to official models of cultural discourse because it embodied those models more deftly and convincingly than state cultural production could ever hope to do so. Every *anekdot*-teller was a Mozart to official culture's army of Salieris.

Again, before it began to wield Article 58 in order to stifle unauthorized outbreaks of humor, the state showed an enthusiastic desire to understand that mode of discourse. In the late 1920s, Lunacharskii conceived a book to be titled *A Social History of Laughter* (which he never wrote), and formed a "committee for the study of satirical genres" under the auspices of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. Lunacharskii's writings on humor characterize it as a "weapon"

(6), a metaphor that would be more or less institutionalized. Dmitrii Moldavskii, author of the memorable 1981 study *Tovarishch Smekh* [Comrade Laughter], explains: “The hero of Soviet satire is Comrade Laughter, [. . .] who takes on the world of greed, bourgeois vulgarity, idiocy, ignorance, and bureaucratism, and says to readers and viewers: ‘Those are our enemies!’” (7). As a weapon, humor was something not only to deploy in defense of the Revolution, but something to which to limit access, to control, to keep out of the hands of the irresponsible.

The difficulties that ideologically aggressive authorities have had maintaining such control have cultural roots that predate the USSR. The official Russian attitude towards laughter, writes Sergei Averintsev, has been traditionally ambivalent, owing to the tension between *smekh i grekh* [laughter and sin], between the sacred and the profane, the ecclesiastical and secular. That view coded laughter as “an uncontrollable, and therefore dangerous, element” (342). The dichotomy between the two categories of thought and expression—Mikhail Bakhtin calls them simply “the serious” and “the comic”—became as important to the Soviet state as it had been to pre-modern religious authorities (in Russia and, earlier, in Western Europe). The institutionalization of a discursive “two-world condition” relegates popular comic forms to the unofficial realm (M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 6), where—as the history of the *anekdot* illustrates—such forms can thrive and become the bases of complex parallel cultures in their own right.

1.2. THE IRONY PAGEANT

The shibboleth of anti-Soviet thought—that the official interpretation of reality was inhumane nonsense—was by the time of Stagnation a foregone conclusion, common knowledge in the cultural tradition of which the *anekdot* was a part. For this reason, there was something

unaesthetic (and depressingly unfunny) about simply stating that knowledge in those terms. The following exchange from the notebooks of Sergei Dovlatov implies as much, in a form akin to the *anekdot* itself:

> —Толя, — зову я Наймана, — пойдемте в гости к Леве Друскину.
> —Не пойду, — говорит, — какой-то он советский.
> —То есть, как советский? Вы ошибаетесь!
> —Ну, антисоветский. Какая разница? (qtd. in Krongauz, "Sovetskii antisovetskii iumor" 227)[23]

Anekdoty, especially political ones, expressed the foregone conclusion in a concise, aesthetically potent manner, focusing in the process more on the nonsensical than the inhumane spasms of the ideology. After a certain point, Soviet social life was so rife with absurdities and incongruities that official representations of that life as rational, unified, and congruous were, for a wide swath of the citizenry, impossible to consume without irony:

> Хрущев приезжает в колхоз и по-отечески разговаривает с колхозниками.
> —Ну как живете? — шутит Никита Сергеевич.
> —Хорошо живем! — шутят в ответ колхозники. (Barskii and Pis'mennyi 46)[24]

This *anekdot* explicitly references, in fact, an incongruity that was central to Soviet culture: the distance between the jocular, "targetless" laughter encouraged by the state culture industry and the cynical, mocking laughter that was increasingly characteristic of the irony-saturated popular collective.[25]

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[23] "I call [Anatolii] Naiman and say, 'Tolia, let's go visit Leva Druskin.' 'No way,' he says, 'that guy is so Soviet.' 'What do you mean, Soviet? You're making a mistake.' 'Anti-Soviet, then. What's the difference?'" This anecdote, and the title of Krongauz's article, bring to mind Vladimir Voinovich's book *Antisovetskii Sovetskii Soiuz* [The Anti-Soviet Soviet Union].

[24] "On a visit to a collective farm Khrushchev is chatting paternally with the farmers. 'So how's life?' Nikita Sergeevich jokes. 'Life's great!' the farmers joke back."

[25] See Prokhorov for a discussion of "purgative laughter" versus the jocular "laughter of the victors" as two types of official laughter in Soviet culture. Mikhail Bakhtin identifies two similar currents in modern

The satirical impulse that found expression in *anekdoty* was in contrast to impulses informing other unofficial forms, including many of the writings of prominent dissidents, who sought to bear witness, to explicate the ideology's criminal illegitimacy. But the iconoclasm of such inscribed anti-Soviet sentiments was rarely effected on the level of textual form, and such writers did not eschew the uncritical use of models of discourse that the official ideology itself championed as the most appropriate for the expression of essential truths. The *anekdot* (as the above Dovlatov quotation suggests) was not a primary weapon in the (big-d) dissident project; the *anekdot*'s relentless attention to official texts reflected the fact that such texts comprised a majority of the extant discursive material available for consumption and response.[26]

As Mikhail Bakhtin tells us, every utterance, as a link in the communicative chain of the given cultural environment, is by definition responsive to utterances that preceded it, whether or not that fact is acknowledged by the speaker ("The Problem of Speech Genres" 68). What is significant about the *anekdot* as a discrete category of utterance is its tendency to display its responsive nature. The *anekdot* not only favors literal dialogue as its chief compositional model; the genre itself frequently engages in symbolic, cross-textual, cross-generic dialogue by isolating concrete examples of other discourse in order to comment on (respond to) them.

During the Soviet period this feature distinguished the *anekdot* both from other popular genres and from the various forms of official discourse: censor-approved cultural production, media texts, political decrees and speeches, slogans, i.e., all utterances produced and/or vetted by the state, which represented itself as a "speaking subject." I do not mean to imply that official

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humor: "purely negative satire" and "recreational drollery deprived of philosophical content" (*Rabelais* 12).

[26] I am certainly not suggesting that dissidents did not tell *anekdoty*, just that there are essential strategic and tactical differences between dissident textual production and the discursive impulses reflected in *anekdoty*.

attempts to imbue all texts with appropriate ideological content resulted in an integrated, coherent expression of the ideology, only that knowledge of those attempts on the part of the "listeners"—and not simply the content of official utterances—affected the nature of the popular response. That response implicitly and explicitly challenged the state's credibility and competence as a textual producer, not merely its legitimacy as a political entity.

As a medium for participation in Soviet society's network of verbal communication (albeit in small, trusted collectives), the *anekdot* articulated a premise about discourse itself that was a threat to the necessary discursive solipsism of official speech. The blind spots of the prevailing worldview, along with the state's aggressive delineation of acceptable and unacceptable models of discourse, created a great potential for transgressive acts on formal and meta-textual levels. A critical mass of the popular collective came to perceive official utterances as disingenuous, mechanistic performances, as moribund speech. As such, state discourse embodied what Henri Bergson considers a fundamental comic stimulus: "something mechanical encrusted on the living" (39). Mass-media texts were simultaneously legible as political and comedic.[27] That built-in, self-contradictory modal duality invited a very deep irony indeed, and the collective ironic reflex—which threatened authoritative models of discourse by "removing the semantic security of 'one signifier : one signified'" (Hutcheon 13)—was manifested with increasing frequency over the course of the Soviet period via the performance of *anekdoty*.

[27] On the reception of Soviet political discourse as popular entertainment, see Cherednichenko.

1.3. PREDECESSORS AND PREMISES

Humor theories—explanations of why people laugh at the things that they laugh at—are commonly divided into three broad categories.[28] Superiority theories examine the phenomenon of humor from the premise that its main function is to give people the pleasure of feeling superior to others by laughing at their weaknesses or misfortunes. This idea has its origins in Plato ("Philebus") and Aristotle (*Poetics*), and was subsequently elaborated by others, most notably Hobbes (*Leviathan*). Relief theories hold that humor's function is to provide a psychic and emotional safety valve via which people can purge themselves of otherwise dangerous anxieties, fears, and hostilities. Freud is the most prominent proponent of this theory, though Herbert Spencer articulated a similar idea decades earlier. Incongruity theories examine the causes of humor, rather than the functions (Morreall 6), and argue that laughter is a response triggered by the co-presence of two logically or otherwise incompatible images or ideas.[29] Bergson (whose interpretation of humor also incorporates elements of superiority theory) and Arthur Koestler are the most oft-cited thinkers to espouse this premise, though it can be traced back to Descartes, Schopenhauer, and Kant (Vogel 6).

Humor was a topic of theoretical interest in Russia before and after 1917. Famed proto-communist Nikolai Chernyshevskii wrote in an 1863 article that laughter allows people to acknowledge "ugliness" or other unpleasant qualities in others, and thereby to take pleasure in their own contrastively positive qualities (a variant of the superiority theory) (293). Chernyshevskii also distinguishes the comic, the essence of which he identifies as

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[28] Several historical surveys of humor theory use the "three theories" approach. Two of the clearest and most concise are to be found in Morreall and Vogel (5-17).

[29] There is no consensus on whether it is the mere apprehension of the incongruity or the resolution of the incongruity in a surprising (and thus laughter-evoking) manner that is the crucial comic stimulus.

"predominance of form over idea," from the sublime, in which ideas take precedence over form (286). His attention to the role of form in a potentially comic stimulus anticipates Bergson's belief that the primary source of humor is behavior or gestures that show an excess reliance on form (or formality), to the risible detriment of "naturalness." Other varieties of the incongruity theory have taken root in Russia. In 1922, for example, Viktor Shklovskii published a short article using *anekdoty* to demonstrate his conclusion that the comic derives from "double semantic comprehension of one phonetic sign" (62).

Subsequent Soviet works on humor typically espoused the "humor as a weapon" thesis, or grounded theoretical observations in pre-Soviet culture (for example, Vladimir Propp's *Problemy komizma i smekha* [Problems of Laughter and the Comic] and Dmitrii Likhachev's "Smekh kak mirovozzrenie" [Laughter as a Worldview]). Iurii Borev's *Komicheskoe, ili o tom, kak smekh kaznit nesovershenstvo mira, ochishchaet i obnovliaet cheloveka i utverzhdaet radost' bytiia* [The Comic, or How Laughter Punishes the World's Imperfection, Purges and Renews a Person, and Affirms the Joy of Existence] combines (in its very title) two views that correspond to two general types of acceptable humor in the USSR: as a means of liquidating undesirable aspects of social life and as an expression of one's expansive, joyous reaction to life itself.[30]

A Soviet-era interpretation of humor that has particular relevance to the study of the *anekdot* is Mikhail Bakhtin's elaboration of carnival as a "special idiom of forms and symbols" (*Rabelais* 10). Like Bergson's notion of laughter as a means for the exposure and correction "inelasticity" in human behavior and speech (14), and Barbara Babcock's observation that a crucial function of the comic is to "remark on the indignity of any closed system" ("Arrange me into Disorder" 103), Bakhtin's treatment of the popular carnival impulse focuses on its

[30] Again, see Prokhorov.

"hostil[ity] to all that [is] immortalized and completed" (*Rabelais* 10). His description of medieval carnival culture as "a second world and a second life outside officialdom [. . .] in which all [. . .] people participated more or less" (*Rabelais* 6) reads as a virtual allegory for Soviet unofficial culture.[31] The crucial current of "grotesque realism" (*Rabelais* 18 and *passim*) is another element shared by Bakhtin's characterization of carnivalesque expression and the Soviet-era *anekdot* (I discuss the importance of the bodily in *anekdoty* in Chapters Five and Six).

Scholarly analysis of the Russian *anekdot* itself began at the end of the nineteenth century, with two large articles on the folk *anekdot* by Pel'ttser and Sumtsov, the first folklorists to examine the generic and thematic features of a genre that had to that point rarely been discussed as an entity separate from the "everyday" (i.e. non-magical) folktale. The two folklorists trace the origins of the genre in more archaic forms of narrative (I discuss their work in Chapter One).

The first edition of the *Bol'shaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia* [Great Soviet Encyclopedia] (1926) notes two attributes that would soon number among the *anekdot*'s most prominent constituent features: its contemporary topicality and its utility as a form of socio-political satire. The *Encyclopedia* thematically classifies *anekdoty*

> into two large groups: *anekdoty* of a general nature, about everyday life, ethnic groups, etc.; and *anekdoty* that correspond to specific, contemporary events. Of particular note among the latter is the political *anekdot*, which acquires great agitational significance during social crises as a special kind of weapon for political struggle [. . .]. (qtd. in Chirkova, *Poetika* 6-7)

This entry is among the last published Soviet acknowledgments of the genre's modern, urban connotation.[32] For most of the Soviet period—especially after the explosion in the underground

[31] In her foreword to the English translation of Bakhtin's *Rabelais*, Krystyna Pomorska notes this connection (xi).

[32] The entry for *anekdot* in the second edition of the *Encyclopedia* (1950) does in fact mention "sharp

anekdot's popularity in the early 1960s and right up until the end of state censorship in the late 1980s—Soviet reference and scholarly works dealt almost exclusively with the *anekdot*'s older, by then secondary meanings: (1) a written genre popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that narrated a trivial but factual (and not necessarily humorous) event in the life of a historical figure; (2) a short account of an unusual (usually fictional) event or situation that is developed into a full-fledged literary work; (3) a traditional (i.e., rural and non-productive) form of short, oral prose closely related to (or a subcategory of) the folktale.

As the encyclopedia definition acknowledges, by the 1920s the genre in its most widespread form had evolved into something different from historical, literary, and traditional folk *anekdoty*. The latter-day *anekdot* is in fact a combination of certain features of the older instantiations, and was already in the process of overtaking them in popularity and productivity by the end of the nineteenth century (Alaev 52). Nevertheless, its status as the most productive genre of Russian urban folklore was officially ignored for decades and, while Soviet philologists published studies of the older, politically inert incarnations of the *anekdot*,[33] including the traditional folk *anekdot*, such scholarship was exceedingly rare, in contrast to the frequent treatments of other oral genres, such as the folktale, the *bylina* [heroic ballad], and the *chastushka*.

The first scholarly examination of the native, contemporary *anekdot* was published in 1989, when Aleksandr Belousov compiled the proceedings of a conference devoted to the genre

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political content" as a generic feature, but only in reference to its western-European, renaissance-era form (*Bol'shaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia*, 2nd ed. 439).

[33] See for example Sidel'nikov, Ivanov, and Dolgopolova ("Ispol'zovanie"). Iu.M. Sokolov's 1938 textbook *Russian Folklore* contains a nine-page discussion of the *anekdot* (442-50) in the first part of the book, on pre-revolutionary folklore, but mentions the word only a handful of times in passing in the second part, which deals with Soviet folklore.

(*Uchebnyi material*). Since then, there have been three dissertations, several monographs, and dozens of articles (adding to work done in the West, primarily by émigrés such as Zhanna Dolgopolova, Abram Terts, and Emil Draitser). The most concentrated and extensive scholarly treatments of the contemporary *anekdot* to date are the monograph by linguists Elena Shmeleva and Aleksei Shmelev (*Russkii anekdot*, 2002) and dissertations by Viktor Khrul' (1993), Ol'ga Chirkova (1997), and Endre Lendvai (2001). Efim Kurganov has published several books on the *anekdot* from a wide-angle, diachronic perspective that does not sharply distinguish the contemporary genre from its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century forebear. Draitser's books on ethnic humor (*Taking Penguins to the Movies*, 1998) and sexual humor (*Making War, Not Love*, 1999) in contemporary Russia provide a wealth of information and insight (and are unique in Anglophone publishing). All other notable analyses of the *anekdot* are articles or chapters. In his articles, Aleksandr Belousov elaborates and contextualizes within Russo-Soviet oral culture several canonical *anekdot* cycles (Shtirlits, Vovochka, Cheburashka). Among the more interpretive treatments of the genre are Abdullaeva's concentrated essays on the significance of the *anekdot* in Soviet social and intellectual life, Aleksei Yurchak's examination of the *anekdot*'s socio-anthropological significance in the era of "late socialism," and Abram Terts's rich and compelling article, "Anekdot v anekdote" [The *Anekdot* Inside the *Anekdot*].

Soviet society in the 1960s and 1970s was a nexus of several conditions posited by the various humor theorists as essential to comic perception. Superiority-theory partisans can point to the affront felt by a disenfranchised intelligentsia living in a society ruled by presumed cultureless bumpkins. Relief theorists can make the case that Soviet underground humor provided a relatively safe outlet for anger, frustration, and fear. Those who consider incongruity the crucial factor in humor find evidence in the many *anekdoty* that play on the baffling logic of

the prevailing ideology, the rampant gaps between ideology and practice, and the increasing artificiality and automatism of the words, actions, and policies of official structures and leaders.[34]

While I do not aspire to develop a unified theory, my own views as elaborated in what follows draw on all three theoretical traditions. Douglas helpfully points out a "common denominator" shared by Bergson and Freud's approaches, both of which, in one way or another, view the joke "as an attack on control" (Douglas 295). The types of control against which the *anekdot* has been mobilized are many, and include not only the obvious excesses of the Soviet security apparatus, censorship organs, and political system, but the ostentatious, self-regulating contortions necessitated by the state's own approach to verbal and other forms of representation.

My working understanding of the *anekdot* privileges neither its anti-communist credentials nor its emotional value to its consumers. I also avoid, however, neglecting the genre's constitutive extrinsic associations in favor of overly formalist description. Thus my list of the defining generic features of the *anekdot* (see Chapters Three and Four) is paradoxically both broader and more concrete than other such lists, and not only draws on established methods of isolating and describing folkloric forms, but takes more than one cue from the notion of speech genres and the so-called "practice theory" understanding of discursive genres as "historically specific elements of social practice, whose defining features link them to situated communicative acts" (Hanks 668). My methods reflect some of the analytical strategies and premises of Russian urban folkloristics (the discipline that first staked a scholarly claim on the *anekdot* in Russia when it became fair game for study in the late 1980s) and Russian cultural

[34] Gregor Benton writes that "the gap between self and society, the widespread tension between two codes of meaning and behavior, those of private and public life—these are the ingredients for an excellent humor" (36).

studies.[35] My approach adds to these conceptual matrices an analytical focus on a particular genre's links with other textual forms in the same culture as a fundamental defining characteristic of that genre.

Although the *anekdot* rapidly acquired new, historically specific features in the transformed socio-political atmosphere following the October Revolution, it is a mistake simply to draw a thick red boundary at 1917 on the timeline of its generic evolution. In many respects, the *anekdot* is just as susceptible to "continuity" arguments as other cultural forms whose historical development straddled the tsarist and Communist periods. The *anekdot*'s status as taboo, in particular, contributed to the "organic" nature of its evolution, consumption, and propagation during the Soviet period; it did not make the transition from oral to written culture (as the folktale had in the nineteenth century[36]) because for almost sixty years it could not be publicly inscribed.[37]

Despite the Soviet *anekdot*'s legendary independence, however, its development was closely linked to that of state ideology and mass textual production. As a register for popular sentiment regarding socio-political formations and phenomena, the *anekdot* was thematically occupied as never before with official policies, actions, and discourse as they reflected more and more clearly the state's goal of horizontal and vertical monopolies on all forms of human

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[35] Representative works can be found in the anthologies edited by Kelly and Shepherd, Barker, and the publications of members of the 1990-93 Working Group on Contemporary Russian Culture (see, for example: Freidin; Condee and Padunov; Condee).

[36] On the evolution of the tale from folklore to literature in European culture, see Zipes (especially 1-48).

[37] Many people, of course, did maintain secret written archives of *anekdoty*, some of which were published after the collectors emigrated (see for example: Draitser, *Forbidden Laughter*; Shturman and Tiktin; Telesin; and Dolgopolova, *Russia Dies Laughing*) or in the USSR beginning in the perestroika period (see especially Borev, *Staliniada*, *Fariseia*, and *XX vek v predaniiakh i anekdotakh*).

activity. As that goal was pursued on an increasingly symbolic, discursive level from the 1960s on, the *anekdot*'s function as meta-discourse became primary. The genre's formal and semantic flexibility (one scholar of the nineteenth-century *anekdot* calls it a "loosely regulated narrative of potential" [Kux 36]) made it a natural medium for spontaneous, performed rejoinder. Furthermore, as a genre capable of effortless parody, owing both to its meta-discursive properties and the fact that the *anekdot* borders on so many other genres, the corpus of *anekdoty* burgeoned during the Soviet period and displayed new formal varieties based on the many new genres and texts to emerge from the prolific fonts of mass-media discourse.

As a genre among genres, the *anekdot*'s role, like that of other representational forms, changed along with the society, and with the obtaining view of textual representation itself within that society. The *anekdot* accrued new stylistic, compositional, and thematic attributes with each major stage of Russo-Soviet cultural history: during the decades of urbanization and modernization that culminated in the Revolution; in the tumultuous early years of Bolshevik rule; after the decisive ascendancy of Stalinism and socialist realism in the early 1930s; again during the relatively liberal Thaw period following Stalin's death; yet again after the onset of the so-called era of Stagnation under Brezhnev and his epigones, Andropov and Chernenko; during perestroika; and, finally, in the "post-ideological" discursive free-for-all that began with the end of the USSR in 1991. Each of these periods engendered characteristic texts, discursive dominants, and socio-political tropes with which the profoundly intertextual *anekdot* engaged on multiple levels.

2.0. CHAPTER ONE: GENERIC PROVENANCE

> *Anekdoty* are the daily sustenance for our conversations. If there were no such thing as *anekdoty*, we would be forced to die in the flower of youth from apathy and hemorrhoids just to spite the author of the book *No More Hemorrhoids*.
> —Nikolai Nekrasov, 1846[38]

This chapter traces the *anekdot*'s historical arc through the word's various associations in European (and eventually Russian) culture, up to the emergence of its twentieth-century meaning. I have organized the chapter according to a rough chronological schema due to the various synchronically coexistent text types (humorous, rhetorical, historiographic, didactic) that contributed generic DNA to the bloodline of the future Soviet *anekdot*. Although jokes are among the most ancient of still-extant verbal forms (Kurganov, *Anekdot kak zhanr* 7),[39] I begin with a relatively late period, the sixth century A.D., which saw the composition of the first titularly "anecdotal" text. The genealogical approach will illuminate a subsequent analysis of the *anekdot*'s distinctive presence in Soviet popular culture, an evolving context in which the genre itself would continue to evolve and—especially in the Brezhnev period—thrive as never before. Beginning a historical survey with the first text to bear the name "anecdote" is appropriate, since that text was, like its eventual namesake in Soviet culture, a mischievous redaction of the official history of an empire.

[38] Qtd. in Khvalin-Gor'kii (3).

[39] See for example Hierocles the Grammarian's fifth-century joke collection, *Philogelos*.

2.1. ETYMOLOGY

Although the word *anekdot* entered Russian as a cognate of the French during the time of Voltaire,[40] its etymological ancestry begins much earlier, with the Greek *anekdotos* [ανέκδοτος] (plural: *anekdota* [ανέκδοτα]), literally "unpublished."[41] The first recorded use of the word was in reference to historian Procopius of Caesaria's scathing account of private lives and personalities in the court of the sixth-century Byzantine emperor Justinian I.[42] Procopius himself did not give his book a title; four centuries after his death, the lexicographer Suidas listed the work as *Anekdota* ("unpublished things") in a tenth-century bibliography to indicate that *The Secret History* (as it is known in English and Russian) had not been published during its author's lifetime. Suidas's entry was the only available information about the work for hundreds of years; the text itself was discovered only in the seventeenth century by the director of the Vatican library. Upon its discovery, *The Secret History* provoked vehement debates among scholars of Byzantine history, and of Procopius's historiography in particular. Its unadorned, often vulgar depictions of the abuses of power, character flaws, and even the physical repulsiveness of

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[40] Voltaire, it is worth noting, published his own collection of Russian anecdotes, *Anecdotes sur le czar Pierre le Grand* (1748).

[41] *An-*, not + *ek-*, out + *didonai*, to give. An older, obsolete meaning of the Greek word is "unmarried (for a woman)" (Chernykh 44).

[42] As Kurganov points out, although Procopius's book was the first known work to be called *anekdota*, the true generic ancestor of the contemporary *anekdot* (and the joke)—the short, punch-lined narrative—is older (*Anekdot kak zhanr* 7). The texts in Hierocles's *Philogelos*, for instance, are strikingly similar to contemporary *anekdoty* and jokes. For example: "An alcoholic was drinking in a bar when someone came up to him and said, 'Your wife is dead.' 'Bartender, some dark wine please!'" (43); "A young man with two horny old women on his hands said to his slaves, 'Give one of them a drink, and screw the other!' The women replied in unison, 'We aren't thirsty!'" (47).

Justinian, Empress Theodora, and the empire's greatest general, Belisarius,[43] stand in sharp contrast to the reverent, patriotic tone of Procopius's other, published histories of the emperor's reign (Williamson 7).[44]

The dramatic contradiction between Procopius's *Anekdota* and other historical writings of the time (including his own) foreshadows the eventual association of the Russian *anekdot* with clandestine, irreverent discourse. Procopius himself was keenly aware of his *Secret History*'s possible impact on future readers. In his foreword, subtitled "The Purpose of this Book," he writes: "those who in the future, if so it happens, are similarly ill-used by the ruling powers will not find this record altogether useless; for it is always comforting for those in distress to know that they are not the only ones on whom these blows have fallen" (38-9). Procopius's authorial duplicity also brings to mind the ideologically schizoid nature of *anekdot* culture in the Soviet Union, where, for example, the most prolific secret compiler of political *anekdoty*, Iurii Borev, was also the author of a seminal textbook of Marxist-Leninist aesthetics,[45] and where Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev declared in a 1989 television appearance that, in the pre-perestroika period, "*anekdoty* were always our salvation."[46]

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[43] The gist of Procopius's exposé is that Justinian was a demon in human guise, Theodora a depraved prostitute, and war hero Belisarius an incompetent, henpecked coward.

[44] *The Secret History* also sparked controversy due to its ambivalent implications for Catholic Church authority. Recognizing the work as authentic was desirable for the Vatican, on the one hand, since the man Procopius had discredited was an emperor of Byzantium and therefore an enemy of Rome. On the other hand, warned jurists, validating a villainous portrait of a ruler whose civil law code was still widely respected and cited might undermine judicial authority (Chekalova 446).

[45] See *Estetika*. Borev published *Staliniada*, the first of his many collections of *anekdoty* and *predaniia* [legends], in 1990.

[46] This information is from Vladimir Bakhtin, who chose the quotation for the title of his article, "Anekdoty nas spasali vsegda" (799).

Another element the sixth-century text has in common with its twentieth-century Russian namesake is a foundation in oral discourse. Much of the scandalous information Procopius recorded had previously circulated in the form of rumors and legends (Tiupa 15). This is not to claim that there is a generic identity between Procopius's *Anekdota* and Soviet-era *anekdoty*, of course; between the tenth and twentieth centuries the term (in its various renderings in the European languages) acquired and shed a variety of inscribed definitions and cultural connotations. It will, however, prove useful to keep in mind the first composition to bear the label—a private, critical, historical narrative composed parallel to official, public histories—when examining the *anekdot*'s cultural orientation in the Soviet Union, an empire that laid claim to being a descendant of the Byzantine empire of which Procopius wrote.

2.2. THE FOLK *ANEKDOT*

Since Russian folklorists began analyzing and cataloguing native folk texts in earnest in the mid-nineteenth century,[47] consensus has classified the *narodnyi* or *fol'klornyi* [traditional folk] *anekdot* as a subcategory or offshoot of the *skazka* [folktale].[48] More specifically, scholars have documented the *anekdot*'s generic proximity to (or near-identity with) the *bytovaia skazka* [tale of everyday life], one of the three recognized major categories of Russian tales, in addition to the *volshebnaia skazka* [wonder tale, sometimes referred to as the magic tale or fairy tale] and the

[47] Russian folklore study began in the 1860s with the work of Aleksandr Afanas'ev and Fedor Buslaev, proponents of the so-called Mythological School. Collection of Russian folk texts had been sporadic and unsystematic until the early nineteenth century, when the Russian Romantic movement sparked an interest in native folk culture. See Oinas and Howell on the history of folklore study in Russia and the Soviet Union.

[48] Many folklorists of the twentieth century also refused to grant the *anekdot* complete generic sovereignty, most notably Vladimir Propp.

skazka o zhivotnykh [animal tale]. This is not to say that *anekdoty* never employ motifs or devices associated with the other categories, but the *anekdot* and the tale of everyday life share several compositional and linguistic features, a preponderance of comic imagery and devices (though much stronger in the *anekdot* [Nikiforov, "Skazka" 351]), and a narrative emphasis on human interaction and behavior in mundane situations. The two genres' shared concern with social themes is reflected in the demographic range of protagonists they have in common: "fools, clever thieves, priests, masters and laborers, spouses, etc." (Iudin 27).[49] Local color and social relations play central roles, especially in the *anekdot*. One list of typical *anekdot* protagonists and situations includes "dunces and picaros, the peasant in the big city, bazaar scenes, the Great Russian and the Little Russian [i.e., Ukrainian —SG], Jews, Tatars, Gypsies, shepherds, wanderers, and monks, each with his own peculiarities, humor, and original style of speech" (Pel'ttser 61). This rather specific and varied collection of *dramatis personae* indicates the temporal distance between such narratives and their ancient textual prototypes, which are also the prototypes of narrative fiction in general: stories about "mythological picaros/tricksters" (Meletinskii, "Skazka-anekdot" 59). Yet, at the same time, the *anekdot* reflects the entire tradition of characterological types. Folktales (and, by extension, *anekdoty*) are part of a tradition of profane texts that arose parallel to sacred narrative tradition, with its creation and initiation myths.

Jack Zipes sees the emergence of parodic *Doppelgangers* of mythological narratives as evidence that "from the beginning, individual imaginations were countering the codified myths of a tribe or society that celebrated the power of god with other 'non-authoritative' tales of their own" (3). He further suggests that such responses to sacred, authoritative discourse afforded the

[49] Iudin sees a causative link between the "formative era of class relations" and the emergence of the *bytovaia skazka*, which he describes as a "reworking of ancestral mythological stories" (5).

"individual imaginations" a degree of stolen, if symbolic, power by "transform[ing] the supernatural into magical and mysterious forces which could change their lives" (3). Zipes's view conflicts with that of Mikhail Bakhtin, whose concept of carnival reads such "individual," oppositional symbolic activity as an integral, very much "authorized" element of the exercise of authority itself.[50]

Whatever the nature of the relationship between myth and tale, the shift from "supernatural" to "magical" and eventually to "realistic" plots is traceable in the evolution of narrative genres; the myths to which Meletinskii and Zipes refer begat a lineage that includes all three categories of folktale (chronologically: animal tales, wonder tales, and everyday tales), fables, and the picaresque novel (Meletinskii, "Skazka-anekdot" 59). As folk narrative evolved from a form of symbolic apprehension of an inscrutable reality into a medium for creativity and entertainment, it preserved certain features that appeared fantastic or magical once the "primitive" belief patterns that had engendered them had become obsolete (Pel'ttser 62). This is the trajectory that presumably led to the wonder tale. The tale of everyday life, the last of the folktale categories to emerge, is concerned with worldly phenomena and social relations rather than timeless, supernatural origins (the metaphysical genealogy of the culture) and thus is the farthest removed from mythological narrative.

The most common motif in everyday tales and *anekdoty* is stupidity, often in juxtaposition and conflict with its opposite; Meletinskii writes that *anekdoty* in particular "are created around the 'stupidity—intelligence' [*glupost'—um*] axis," and that the presence of the two extremes gives the genre its characteristic "absurd paradoxicality" ("Skazka-anekdot" 73). The descendant of the trickster-myth hero is most commonly a *durak* [fool] but may also be a

[50] I am grateful to Petre Petrov for helpful discussions on the issue of carnival and of sacred versus profane texts in oral tradition.

khitrets [latter-day trickster figure, from *khitryi*, which can mean devious, clever, and/or resourceful]. Often the fool's naïveté and uncritical acceptance of illogical explanations for phenomena leave him open to deception and exploitation by the *khitrets*. Sometimes the fool himself is a trickster in fool's guise and achieves a goal (food, money, a wife) thanks to others' underestimation of fools, or simply through dumb luck; the standard index of folktale motifs includes a subsection called *anekdoty o schast'i po sluchaiu* ["*anekdoty* about accidental good fortune"] (Andreev 97). This character type is sometimes referred to as a *shut* [buffoon] and considered by scholars a hybrid of or link between the *durak* and the *khitrets* (Meletinskii, "Skazka-anekdot" 71). The motif of "strategic idiocy," as we shall see, is highly relevant to the Soviet *anekdot*.

Sometimes the fool's simple-minded behavior is a manifestation of his stubborn belief in magic or miracles, a motif that lends support to readings of the *anekdot* as a "comic reaction to the mythological notions of primitive folklore" (Meletinskii, *Geroi* 239, qtd. in Iudin 10). Everyday tales and *anekdoty* are not only evolutionarily distant from the ancient worldview that originally engendered narrative; they are challenges to purely supernatural (mythological, magical, or Christian) explanation for events and human behavior. Some eighteenth-century collectors and compilers of folklore explicitly emphasized this point. Vasilii Berezaiskii, for example, compiler of a 1798 collection of *anekdoty* about the residents of the legendary Russian "fooltown" Poshekhon'e,[51] was an avid debunker of superstitions, one of the most prominent of which, in his opinion, was belief in wonder tales (Moldavskii, "Vasilii Berezaiskii" 243).

Everyday tales, like the so-called democratic satirical novella, which is their counterpart

[51] Berezaiskii's collection would later influence satirist Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin's much better-known fictional accounts of life in Poshekhon'e, *Poshekhonskie rasskazy* (1883-84) and *Poshekhonskaia starina* (1887-89) (Moldavskii, "Vasilii Berezaiskii" 245). The term "fooltown" is Davies' (*Jokes* 12).

in the nascent secular literature of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Russia, are cultural expressions of structural changes in Russian society effected mainly by the Petrine reforms. Those reforms involved several impulses that influenced the evolution of both folk and literary narrative in Russia: reduction of the authority of the Orthodox Church in favor of the monarchy[52]; establishment of a structured hierarchy of urban professions and social classes; and an influx of Western literature (initially from Poland) that resulted in part from Peter's aggressive Westernization of Russian culture. These reforms thrust social and secular themes to the forefront of cultural consciousness. Jack Haney writes that the everyday tales that flourished during this period "reflect social conditions and mores that simply did not pertain to Russia before the eighteenth century [. . .]. The themes of infidelity, greed, laziness, dishonesty, drunkenness, and just plain bad luck are played out in the stratified society that Russia had become by the end of [that] century" (*An Introduction to the Russian Fairy Tale* 109).

Eventually everyday tales and *anekdoty* came to dominate the folktale corpus. Andreev organizes the material in his 1929 *Ukazatel' skazochnykh siuzhetov* [Index of Folktale Motifs][53] as follows:

I. Animal Folktales
II. Folktales Proper
    A. Wonder tales

[52] Chudinova quotes a nineteenth-century cultural historian to illustrate how Peter used popular cultural forms (e.g., raucous public festivals and parades with garish costumes and loud instruments) to emphasize the novelty of his reformed Russia and to distract people from the authority of the Orthodox Church: "the yelps and thunder of the monstrous orchestra as it moved through the city was meant to underscore the governmental import of the event and to… 'destroy the people's anticipation of the installation of a new patriarch'" ("Shutki i potekhi Petra Velikogo" 881, qtd. in Chudinova 155). In 1721 Peter had replaced the institution of the patriarchate with a Holy Synod subservient to the state.

[53] Andreev's index is a translation and expansion (to include Russian texts) of Aarne's standard index of European folktales.

B. Legendary Tales
C. Novelistic Tales
D. Tales about Foolish Devils (Giants, etc.)

III. *Anekdoty*. (119-20)

Anekdoty comprise almost forty percent of the motifs catalogued by Andreev and everyday tales (which he includes under his "novelistic tales" rubric) another twenty percent. Furthermore, those two categories have the lowest percentage of motifs in common with or known in the Western European oral tradition; 66.3 percent are original Russian motifs (Iu. M. Sokolov, *Russian Folklore* 439). The prevalence of native material testifies to the status of *anekdoty* and everyday tales as vehicles for socio-cultural introspection and the portrayal of local and national phenomena, events, and issues.

The content of the older two categories of folktale remained stable—animal tales still embraced anthropomorphism, and magical objects and creatures remained central in wonder tales— but they, too, lost their explicitly mythological function and became primarily entertainment genres. This process was most visible in children's culture (fairy tales), but also "high" culture; in the late eighteenth century, when Russian writers had begun to appreciate the folktale and to compose literary tales of their own, the genre was just as popular as the novel and the novella (Gerlovan 95). Oral literature in general in Russia had long been less exclusively associated with the lower classes than in Western Europe. Roman Jakobson contends that oral culture was "at the service of all levels of the social hierarchy" (633).

Compilers and authors of folktales were not ethnographers; they chose texts for their amusement and entertainment value and explicitly referred to that criterion in titles. M.D. Chulkov, for example, gave his four-part collection, *Peresmeshnik, ili Slavenskie skazki* [The Mocking Bird, or Slavic Folktales, 1766-68], a subtitle suggesting why and when the tales might be read: *dlia preprovozhdeniia skuchnogo vremeni* [To Get Through Dull Times] (Gerlovan 98-

99). This function of the folktale, writes Kurganov, is a product of its primeval origins in agricultural, peasant society, where the genre's slow pace and deliberate "retardation" of the narrative, as well as its elaborate beginning and ending formulae, made it a useful way to while away the hours during "long, rural winter evenings" or while traveling (which is why sedentary professions, such as carriage drivers [or today, cab drivers], tend to make good storytellers) (*Literaturnyi anekdot* 44).

Even in an environment of renewed appreciation for the aesthetic functions of literature, however, the folktale had by no means migrated completely into the realm of entertainment. Many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers—Karamzin, for example—emphasized (Gerlovan uses the term "rehabilitated") the instructive potential of the genre as an engaging illustration of virtue triumphing over vice (Gerlovan 99). The term *bytovaia skazka* has even been rendered in English as "moral tale" (Harkins, "Folktales" 148).

As Pel'ttser (65) and Harkins ("Folktales" 148) have observed, the *anekdot*'s essential divergence from the tale is its lack of a moral message. The didactic function of the folktale, and not only the portrayal of supernatural participation in and influence on human affairs, was what the folk *anekdot* implicitly rejected, and what represents the crucial difference between the *anekdot* and folktales of all three categories. In this respect, the folktale and the folk *anekdot* parted company under circumstances similar to those surrounding the divergence of the historical and literary *anekdoty* (see below); in both cases, the latter genre eschewed the moralism characteristic of the former (Pel'ttser 65).

In addition to its novel discursive functions, the folk *anekdot* has compositional and other features that confirm its status as an independent genre. The mono-episodic narrative structure of the *anekdot* represents a dismantling of the series of linked narrative episodes characteristic of

the folktale (Meletinskii, "Skazka-anekdot" 61). In this regard, Kurganov attributes the emergence of the *anekdot* as a genre separate from the tale to an extra-textual influence: the city (*Anekdot kak zhanr* 13).[54] The atomistic, serialized nature of the *anekdot* corpus likewise reflected the accelerated, urban tempo, and also represented a further separation of "profane" folk genres, such as the *anekdot*, from the sacred myths that had engendered the practice of narrative in the first place and that were "overtly and covertly interconnected" as part of a comprehensive and transcendent worldview (Haney 8).

The *anekdot* rapidly became a genre of choice not only for contemporary, mundane themes with no "message," but also for vulgar and taboo topics. Within the thematic and stylistic range of the folktale tradition from which it came, the *anekdot* is particularly close to the erotic tale.[55] Both tend toward a shorter, simpler narrative style than the "mainstream" folktale. The *anekdot* and the erotic tale, for example, forego wordy and/or rhyming openings such as "V nekotorom tsarstve, v nekotorom gosudarstve" ["In a certain kingdom, in a certain land"] or "Zhil da byl" [literally "There lived and there was," the Russian equivalent of "Once upon a time"] in favor of plain, narrative prose that immediately establishes the protagonist(s) and/or the setting: "One day an old woman went…" or "A peasant man said to his wife…" (Nikiforov, "Erotika" 122). Moreover, what was marginal in the folktale genre—the sexual explicitness of the erotic tales—became central in the breakaway genre of the *anekdot*.

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[54] In Chapter Two I discuss the influence on folk texts of the mass urbanization of the Russian peasantry that began with the emancipation of the serfs in 1861.

[55] From the beginning of folktale compilation, collections of "secret" or "indecent" tales have existed parallel to the canonical corpus. Afanas'ev's *Zavetnye skazki* [Secret Tales] were first published during his lifetime in Geneva and have been republished several times since, most recently in 1997 (Afanas'ev, *Narodnye russkie skazki ne dlia pechati*). On the publication history of the tales, see Haney, "Mr. Afanasiev's Naughty Little Secrets."

An especially important departure from the folktale is the fact that a folk *anekdot* was frequently told as if it were an actual occurrence, even when it was obviously fictional (Raikova 210).[56] The teller of a folk *anekdot* would often claim a first-hand connection to the protagonist(s) or at least report the immediate source of the *anekdot*. Aside from the obvious written/oral distinction between literary/historical *anekdoty* and folk *anekdoty*, they are distinguished by the fact that the written *anekdot* almost exclusively depicts important and famous people—monarchs, politicians, writers, artists—while its folkloric counterpart is populated by fictional characters, though of recognizable types (Chirkova 3-4). It is significant that the profession of an *anekdot*'s truthfulness was not to be taken as a literal claim that the narrated event actually happened. In contrast to its historiographic counterpart, writes Kurganov, the folk *anekdot* states a "truth" on a more abstract, psychological or philosophical level (*Anekdot kak zhanr* 10). Moreover, preemptive claims of veracity forestall any connection to the supernatural world, and therefore any implication of higher moral authority on the part of the text or its teller. At the same time, the fictionality of the text precludes links with real-life figures, i.e., with secular sources of authority. In this sense the declaration of an *anekdot*'s veracity might have been an ironic, implicit reference to the historical *anekdot*.

"Ethnographic" truth was also important, though again through the filter of the entertainment mode; the "fact" presented in the *anekdot* "was interesting insofar as it was a fact taken from folk life,… and…presented in a playful form" (Pel'ttser 59-60). A speaker might

[56] The first known recorded Russian folktale, about a peasant's encounter with a bear while stuck inside a honey tree, was told to Pope Clement VII by the Russian ambassador to the Vatican in 1525 and written down in Latin by a historian. The ambassador prefaced the tale as a real-life event that had happened to a "certain villager who lived not far from him" (Haney, *Introduction* 3).

enhance claims of the text's veracity by using specific toponyms[57] and personal names, a device that distinguishes the *anekdot* from the traditional folktale with its "certain kingdoms" and nameless peasants, priests, shepherds, etc. (Iudin 27). The use of such details is a feature that the *anekdot* shares with other types of "non-folktale prose" such as fabulates (a narrative related as a real-life event that happened to a third party), rumors, and legends.[58]

The folk *anekdoty* included in the best-known collection of Russian tales, Aleksandr Afanas'ev's *Narodnye russkie skazki*, have much in common with contemporary *anekdoty* (and with Western jokes for that matter). Again, the motif of stupidity is rampant. Blatant idiocy, lapses in logic, and touches of black humor are common. Note the comic lack of self-awareness implicit in the following *anekdot* (a mother calling her son a "whoreson"):

> Старуха-мать ругала мальчишку, чтоб он не ходил на реку купаться: "Ну, курвин сын, смотри, коль утонешь, так и домой не ходи!" (*Narodnye russkie skazki A.N. Afanas'eva* 3: 196)[59]

Self-defeating logical misfires are also frequent:

> Раз зимою ехали по Волге-реке извозчики. Одна лошадь заартачилась и бросилась с дороги в сторону; извозчик тотчас погнался за нею и только

[57] The use of a toponym was often a marker of *anekdoty* about "fooltowns," i.e., a protagonist's connection to a certain place might signal that he is about to enact a codified quality (stupidity, stinginess, etc.) associated with the inhabitants of that place. On this, see Iudin (27).

[58] In addition to their "conscious emphasis on verisimilitude," writes Raikova, non-folktale prose genres are characterized by "extra-aesthetic functions (informative, didactic, etiological, mnemonic, utilitarian, etc.),…an absence of compositional and stylistic canons, and a close connection between the oral text and the situational speech context" (210).

[59] "An elderly mother was scolding her son not to go swimming in the river: 'And if you drown, you whoreson, don't bother to come home!'" The punch line of this text ("If you drown, don't bother...") entered the language as an idiom still in use today (Valery Belyanin, personal communication, July 2002).

> хотел ударить кнутом, как она попала в майну [полынью] и пошла под лед со всем возом. “Ну, моли бога, что ушла, — закричал мужик, — а то я бы нахлестал тебе бока-то!” (*Narodnye russkie skazki A.N. Afanas'eva* 3: 196)[60]

Anekdoty could also express cynicism and anti-sentimentalism, often in the person of a mean, callous, or otherwise undutiful wife:

> Поехал молодой мужик на промыслы, а жена пошла его провожать; прошла с версту и заплакала. “Не плачь, жена, я скоро приеду”. — “Да разве я о том плачу? У меня ноги озябли!” (*Narodnye russkie skazki A.N. Afanas'eva* 3: 196)[61]

Some of the *anekdoty* in the collection are simple word play based on the linguistic ignorance of foreigners:

> Зашел как-то немец в русскую церковь. Стал дьякон читать Евангелие:
> —*Салафииль же роди Зоровавеля...*
> Немец плюнул и говорит:
> —Фу, какой вздор! Маленька птишка солофель родила большую птису журавéля! (*Narodnye russkie skazki ne dlia pechati* 463)[62]

Other categories of *anekdot*, especially those published in *zavetnye* [forbidden] collections, indicate the genre’s relationship to the tradition of so-called *potaënnaia literatura* [“hidden literature”] in Russian culture, which satirized figures of authority such as priests or

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[60] “One winter’s day a carriage was traveling on the ice of the Volga River. One of the horses suddenly reared up and tore off towards the bank; the driver jumped down and ran after it, and was about to give it a swat with the whip when the horse fell through the ice, dragging the entire load with it. ‘You should thank God you went off under that ice,’ cried the peasant, ‘otherwise I’d have thrashed you good!’”

[61] “A young peasant was leaving on a hunting trip and his wife was seeing him off. After walking a mile she started to cry. ‘Don’t cry, wife, I’ll come home soon.’ ‘You think that’s why I’m crying? My feet are frozen!’”

[62] “A German goes into a Russian church. The deacon starts reading the gospel: ‘and Salafiil begat Zorobabel….’ The German spits and says: ‘Phooey! What nonsense! A bird as small as a nightingale [*solovei*] giving birth to a big bird like the crane [*zhuravl'*]!’”

even monarchs (Kharitonova 364). The satirical and politically or religiously heretical strain in the *anekdot* is also in part the legacy of groups that served as the performers and preservers of short oral (and many other cultural) forms in Russia for centuries: minstrels and buffoons.

2.3. MINSTRELS AND BUFFOONS

By the time humorous narratives began to appear in print in Russia in the eighteenth century, cultural forms about or inspired by popular entertainers—traditionally referred to as *veselye liudi* ["jolly people"]—had been part of Russian folklore for centuries, testifying to a strong native tradition of popular performing arts. There are references to *skomorokhi*[63] [minstrels] and *shuty* [buffoons[64]] in the oldest East Slavic written texts, dating from the eleventh century. Orthodox ecclesiastical authorities began to frown on such performers within a few decades of the Christianization of Kievan Rus' in 988 and never relented. Although the church was suspicious of all native traditional culture,[65] since that culture predated the arrival of Christianity, the church reserved particular scorn for the *skomorokhi*, purportedly because they had evolved from a class of pagan priests. The church considered the *skomorokhi* "virtually the embodiment of paganism, and, with their close ties to the people, a very real threat to the new religion" (Zguta 15).[66] Thus

[63] The etymology of the Russian word *skomorokh* is unclear, but despite the fact that the *skomorokhi* were not only comedians but musicians, actors, acrobats, and animal trainers, most of the suggested origins of the word have to do with humor: the Arabic *maskhara* ["laughter, mockery"] (Pel'ttser 79); the ancient Greek *skommarxos* ["joke, prank"]; the Italian *scaramuccia* ["jester"] (Vasmer 648).

[64] I follow Patterson in translating the Russian word *shut* as "buffoon."

[65] For the same reason, in addition to the Russian Orthodox Church's six-century monopoly on written culture, there are no known transcripts of Russian folklore before the seventeenth century (Jakobson 632), the 1525 Latin tale cited above being an anomalous exception.

[66] The Church also disapproved of the *skomorokhi* because their performances typically ended in village-wide drinking binges (Pel'ttser 82). Also, the *skomorokhi* sometimes conned, robbed, or otherwise

the minstrels' image in written texts—the overwhelming majority of which were religious until the seventeenth century—was almost exclusively negative. In an entry in the *Primary Chronicle* for the year 1068, the monk Nestor warns that "the devil deceives us, with all manner of enticements he draws us away from God, with horns and *skomorokhi*" (qtd. in Zguta 3). The *Pchela* [Bee], a twelfth-century Slavic translation of classical aphorisms, lumps the minstrels as a class together with prostitutes and accuses them of "singing villainous songs." The sixteenth-century *Domostroi*, Muscovite Russia's most prominent guide to proper behavior, calls the laughter and merrymaking inspired by the *skomorokhi* "devilish" (Zguta 23-24). Compare these characterizations with that of the hypothetical *anekdot*-teller in the *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* article I cite above.

Initially known mostly for instrumental music, dancing, and (what today are called) circus arts such as juggling, acrobatics, and trained bear acts, beginning in the twelfth century the *skomorokhi* gradually became professional performers (and thus preservers) of native oral literature. The group that had previously fulfilled that function—the Kievan court poets [*gusliari*, from *gusli*, an East Slavic stringed instrument]—merged with the *skomorokhi* as the Kievan court itself rapidly faded from power and influence, owing to internecine conflicts and invasion by the Mongols. The minstrels inherited the *gusliari* tradition of performing the heroic ballads known as *byliny*, and also became associated with other oral genres, such as the historical song, the folktale, seasonal and wedding songs, and various incantations and proverbs (Zguta 81).[67] When the fall of the Kievan dynasty and continued scorn from the church forced most

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fleeced their audiences (Pel'ttser 82), suggesting that their actions might have given real-life impetus to traditional trickster narratives.

[67] Harkins writes that the *skomorokh* repertoire and style was also likely influenced by "foreign itinerant entertainers, including the German *Spielmänner*, who visited Russia in the medieval period, and perhaps

skomorokhi to migrate north towards Novgorod in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, their audience profile changed significantly. The repertoire with which the *gusliari* had entertained (and glorified) the Kievan princes was not suited to village audiences. So, in a process analogous to the later emergence of "purely" humorous and entertaining narratives out of the tradition of the didactic historical *anekdot*, the *skomorokhi* modified texts by, for example, adding "humorous or fantastic" elements to *byliny* to give them broader appeal (Zguta 89). Again, the Soviet period would see its own comic revisions of "epic" texts.

The frequency and stridency of the church's denunciations indicate its awareness of the reputation and influence the minstrels enjoyed among the folk, who "not only rushed willingly to see the spectacles but would commit [*skomorokhi*] repertoires to memory" (Vlasova 50). The *skomorokhi* and their audiences influenced each other's oral literature. The minstrels would incorporate traditional folk forms and motifs into their acts and spread them from village to village as they traveled. The original compositions and forms of the *skomorokhi*, in turn, influenced the development of folk culture.

One folkloric genre from the Novgorodian tradition that shows the influence of the *skomorokhi* is the short, comic dialogue, which Vlasova calls "a special type of folk *anekdot*" (59):

> —Симон Поликарпович, сколько тебе лет-то?
> —Семьдесят, бабушка, семьдесят! (Vlasova 52)[68]
>
> —Федул, что губы надул?
> —Кафтан прожег.
> —Да велика ли дыра-то?
> —Один ворот остался. (Vlasova 59)[69]

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by Byzantine mime entertainers, who are depicted in early frescoes on the walls of the Cathedral of St. Sophia in Kiev" ("Skomorokhi" 422).

[68] "'Simon Polikarpovich, how old are you?' 'Seventy, grandma, seventy!'"

—Медведя поймал!
—Веди сюда!
—Да нейдет!
—Так сам иди!
—Да не пускает! (Vlasova 60)[70]

Such texts were preserved in their original form or embedded in folk songs, folktales, and plays depicting visits by the *skomorokhi*, an element of peasant life that itself found vivid and approving reflection in folklore. Positive images of the minstrels in folklore also probably indicate their own attempts to counter their negative portrayal in church writings by composing texts in which minstrels exhibit heroism or even possess magical powers.

Under Ivan the Terrible, in the second half of the sixteenth century, the *skomorokhi* enjoyed something of a reprieve, at least from the secular authorities, and were invited to perform at court.[71] Their most requested genre during this period was the historical song, especially songs that glorified the tsar's latest military campaign. Later, after the persecution resumed, these songs were reworked and Ivan was transformed from a heroic protagonist into a villainous or comic figure. A famous song about Ivan's capture of the Tatar capital of Kazan, for example, was reduced from a near-eulogy "to a mere anecdote" (Zguta 97). The *skomorokhi*'s reworkings of texts subjected other rulers to similarly irreverent treatment, including even the Christianizer of Rus' himself, Vladimir, "the Sun of Kiev," who had traditionally figured in heroic ballads as a King Arthur-type figure (Zguta 89).

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[69] "'Why the long face, Fedul?' 'I accidentally burned my caftan.' 'Is there a big hole in it?' 'All that's left is the collar.'"

[70] "'I caught a bear!' 'Bring it here!' 'He won't budge!' 'Then come here yourself!' 'He won't let me!'"

[71] Ivan employed *bakhari* [blind storytellers] to help put him to sleep at night. Ivan also reportedly liked to put on masks and frolic with the *skomorokhi* (Pel'ttser 80).

The minstrels' long struggle for survival in the face of church and, increasingly, government persecution found reflection in the sharp, socially oriented wit and anti-clerical tone of the songs, tales, dialogues, and other texts they performed. One Soviet commentator, appropriately emphatic about the anti-religious and politically irreverent elements of *skomorokh* art, overstates the minstrels' cultural place only somewhat when she calls them "the persecuted representatives of the folk [*narodnaia*] artistic intelligentsia" (Vlasova 54). Zguta is slightly less dramatic and anachronistic, describing the *skomorokhi* not as the "intelligentsia" of the common folk, but "the cultural spokesmen of a basically oral, peasant society" (xi).[72]

Popular regard for the *skomorokhi* was probably enhanced by their irreverence towards institutions of authority. Like the cult-priests from whom their profession descended, the minstrels displayed special knowledge of, and a willingness to speak frankly about, forces that controlled life and death. The role of the *skomorokhi* indicates the ritualistic and mythological roots of cultural performance, the palpable power of the storyteller, the trickster, a figure who mediates between the supernatural and the mundane (Rudnev, *Slovar'* 28). The minstrel, like the trickster, the jester, and the fool, is both a character in and a transmitter of vestigially mythological narrative.

Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich officially outlawed minstrelsy in 1648, and nine years later the Church excommunicated the *skomorokhi* en masse. Most members of the now-illegal profession found other means of livelihood or slipped into poverty, but some continued to perform, wandering among the villages and towns of the Russian countryside. The rise of written culture and the beginning of professional theater in Russia effectively snuffed out the remnants of the minstrel class within a century-and-a-half of the tsar's decree. The last firsthand

[72] The notion of the popular entertainer as a "spokesman" would find resonance in Soviet culture in such figures as Mikhail Zhvanetskii (see Chapter Three).

references to them date from the late eighteenth century; a visitor to Siberia in 1768 writes of performances by "intelligent fools who sing aloud about past history."[73] The legacy of their seven-century presence in Russian popular culture, however, is apparent in a wide variety of forms and texts from the realms of folklore, music, theater, and dance. Just as the minstrels had inherited a corpus of oral literature from the obsolete Kievan court poets, the tales and ballads brought to the north by the *skomorokhi* were passed along to the peasant *skaziteli* [storytellers] who would become the primary preservers of Russian oral literature in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries (Zguta 97). This historical connection between the *skomorokhi* and the subsequent traditions of which the folk *anekdot* was a part, as well as the strong element of irreverence and parody the minstrels fomented in Russian folk culture, make their contribution to the development of the *anekdot* an important one.

With the lasting secularization of the tsarist state and the subordination of the church under Peter in the early-eighteenth century, popular performers appeared again at the imperial court. Like other Petrine innovations, the *pridvornyi shut* [court jester] had European origins, as did literary portrayals of jesters, which began in earnest in 1519 with the publication of *Ein Kurtzweitiglesen von Eulen Spiegeln*, the anecdotal exploits of the German Til Eulenspiegel (Kokorev 220). Pel'ttser writes that Eulenspiegel appealed most to common folk, since he was typically depicted doing "battle with the upper classes" (77). Eulenspiegel spawned similar literary jesters in other countries, including Poland, whose "national jester" was a character named Sowizdrzał (Pel'ttser 76).

By the time books about Sowizdrzał were translated into Russian, stories about the most famous such figure in Russian history and literature, Ivan Balakirev, court jester to Peter the

[73] This comment is in a letter from P.A. Demidov to G.F. Miller (Sheffer 195, qtd. in Zguta 65).

Great, were already part of the native oral culture. Peter, the chief innovator in Russian imperial history, in the *anekdoty* is continually impressed by Balakirev's creative solutions to problems:

> Тогда-то, в пылу гнева, его царское величество указал, чтобы шут тотчас же убирался с глаз долой и не смел показываться.
> —Ступай вон с моей земли, чтоб духу твоего тут не пахло, — кричал разгневанный царь.
> Балакирев в самом деле пропал из Питера, и долго не было о нем слышно. Но раз, сидя у окна, царь видит, что мимо тихохонько едет в одноколке Балакирев. Взбешенный этой дерзостью, царь выбегает на крыльцо, машет своей дубинкой и кричит шуту:
> —Как смеешь ты, бездельник, не повиноваться моему указу и, не испрося моего позволения, являться на моей земли!
> —Тише, царь, не сердись, а одумайся, да спроси. Я ведь не на твоей земле.
> —Как не на моей, каналья?
> —А вот как: погляди-ко, у меня в одноколке земля шведская; я купил ее на свои денежки, — вот и свидетельство на покупку, которое я там же выправил. На-ко, погляди. Что, взял, Алексеич? Прощай!
> И шут, повернув лошадь, медленно отъехал от крыльца. Но царь, смеясь остроумной выдумке, забыл свой гнев, велел воротить шута и принял его в прежнюю милость. (*Anekdoty o shute Balakireve* 33, qtd. in Putilov 152)[74]

Like other historical figures who enjoy textual immortality as folk heroes, the anecdotal Balakirev is almost certainly a composite of other, less famous jokers and typical folkloric

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[74] "One time his Majesty the Tsar [Peter] became so angry that he ordered Balakirev out of his sight and not to dare show his face again. 'Remove yourself from my land! I don't want to see hide nor hair of you!' shouted the enraged tsar. Balakirev vanished from Petersburg and there was no news about him for a long time. But one day Peter was sitting at the window and suddenly saw Balakirev and pass by casually in a carriage. Infuriated by this impudence, the tsar ran outside, and yelled to him: 'Who gave you permission to violate my decree by showing your face on my land, you scoundrel?' Balakirev stopped the carriage and said: 'Your Majesty! My horses are indeed on your land, I will not dispute that, but you did not banish *them* from the fatherland. As for my wife and me, we are on our own land.' 'What do you mean?' 'It's very simple and normal: allow me to show you documentation of a land purchase.' Balakirev handed the tsar a piece of paper. The sovereign burst out laughing when he looked and saw that there was a layer of dirt on the floor of the carriage. He read the proof of purchase of the Swedish land and forgave Balakirev."

characters.[75] In the introduction to an 1899 collection of *anekdoty* about Balakirev, he is identified as a man of simple stock who was eventually made a nobleman for his services to the emperor (*Anekdoty o shute Balakireve* 4). He is credited with relieving the occasional painful spasms that Peter suffered as a long-term result of being poisoned as a child (reportedly, by his half-sister and rival, Sofia). By amusing the anger-prone and unpredictable ruler, Balakirev is said to have saved many a life (5). The imperial-era introduction also predictably locates the cultural significance of the jester's jokes and behavior in their "instructive… depiction of the mind of the Russian and his zeal for his monarch" (6). Another *anekdot* collection from the same decade, however, credits Balakirev with serving Russia's national interest in a more concrete way by "constantly telling the tsar the truth to his face… and thereby enlightening Peter to many things of which he otherwise would not have been aware" (Krivoshlyk 21).[76]

2.4. SHORT HUMOROUS GENRES

The Romantic-era renovation of the historical *anekdot* (see below) was an alchemic blending of that form with other types of texts: humorous short narratives known by other names, and the folk *anekdot*. Interest in the former grew out of the writers' aesthetic playfulness, while their

[75] One nineteenth-century anthology collects *anekdoty* about three other renowned jesters in addition to Balakirev: Ian D'Acosta, a Portuguese émigré who came to Russia during the reign of Peter the Great; Antonio Pedrillo, an Italian initially invited to Russia as a court violinist; and a certain Kul'kovskii, about whom biographical data is scarce. For more information and dozens of *anekdoty* from this and similar collections see Kurganov, *Anekdot kak zhanr*.

[76] Peter himself used the jesters' customary license to speak frankly in order to promote his reforms, urging the jesters "to make a game of the old-fashioned prejudices and customs so firmly rooted in society," writes Shoubinsky. "Under cover of a jester," he continues, "[Peter] conveyed many a plain truth to the nobles. When the latter used to complain to him of the too unceremonious behavior of the jesters, he would answer, 'what can I do with them? They are fools, you know'" (4-5, qtd. in Otto 116).

interest in the latter reflected their commitment to a conscientious representation of their native culture. Similar impulses would inform the Soviet intelligentsia's embrace of the *anekdot* a century later.

Storytelling as a form of amusement in Russia certainly predated the association of the word *anekdot* with short narrative humor. Adam Olearius, a Dutch scholar who wrote a detailed account of his visit to Muscovy in the 1630s, was struck by Russians' penchant for telling vulgar stories for entertainment. He noted:

> [They] speak of debauchery, of vile depravity, of lasciviousness, and of immoral conduct committed by themselves and by others. They tell all sorts of shameless fables, and he who can relate the coarsest obscenities and indecencies, accompanied by the most wanton mimicry, is accounted the best companion and is the most sought after. (142)

Although the phenomenon of short, written humorous texts—like that of the historical anecdote—was a foreign import, such texts quickly took root in Russia, in large part owing to the native tradition of oral humor of which Olearius wrote (Kurganov, *Literaturnyi anekdot* 36). The first collections of humorous material to appear in Russia, like the first anthologies of didactic texts, were translations of works published in Poland in the seventeenth century, an age of pronounced Polish influence on Russian culture.

In Poland such texts were called *żarty* or *facecje*, the latter term derived from the Latin *facetiae*, anthologies of which had first appeared in Italy in the fifteenth century. Longer humorous narratives were already well known in Europe by that time, most famously the fourteenth-century classics, *The Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales*. Like those works, *facetiae* drew on the age-old oral traditions of Europe and the East, and the development of both the literary novella and the *facetia* was marked by continuous mutual influence (Kurganov, *Literaturnyi anekdot* 36). One scholar writes that the *facetia* emerged because the type of humor

and thematics characteristic of it were such strong currents in earlier narratives that, soon after the appearance of the novella and other secular forms of literature, "the jocular texts among them became more and more preponderant, and ultimately collections began to contain quite obscene anecdotes intended not to instruct and admonish the reader, as before, but only to amuse him" (Andreevskii 776). "Natural selection" by the cultural consumer isolated and privileged certain types of texts.

The first collection of *facetiae* was *Poggio Florentini Facetiarum Liber*, published in Latin in 1470 by Poggio Bracciolini, whom some consider the founder of the genre (Khrul' 31). Poggio's collection was reprinted many times in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and translated into the major European languages. Similar collections soon began to appear elsewhere, including one in France entitled *Moyen de parvenir*, which is sometimes attributed to Rabelais (Andreevskii 776). Most of Poggio's *facetiae* have themes common to later humorous literature and folklore, including Russian folktales and *anekdoty*: adultery, stupidity, thievery, female guile, and corruption and lasciviousness among the clergy:

> There was a certain man of Gubbio called Giovanni, and he was a very jealous person, and could never find a sure way of convincing himself if his wife was faithful to him or not. So the jealous fellow thought of a plan worthy of himself, and castrated himself, with the idea that, should his wife afterwards have a child, he would be sure of her adultery. (Poggio 114)
>
> One of our citizens, who was a man of spirit, had for a long time been tormented by a grave malady. A friar came to exhort him to patience, and, among other things which he said to console the sick man, he told him that God often inflicts evils on those whom He loves. "I don't wonder, then, that God has so few friends," said the sick man. "If he treats them in this way, He will have fewer still." (Poggio 104-5)

Florentine *facetia* formally resembled older genres such as the parable or the classical apothegm, but expressed a "ribald, licentious" (Storer 2) spirit absent from those earlier forms, which (like Renaissance historical anecdotes) were typically morals embedded in short narratives.

The prominence of "satire and disrespect" in Poggio's facetiae (Storer 2) is somewhat surprising, since he worked for the Vatican as a pontifical secretary (a position he took more out of financial than religious considerations). According to Poggio, his source for many of the *facetiae* in his collection was the informal gatherings attended by him and his colleagues. He dubbed such sessions "the lie factory" because of the constant exchange of witticisms, tall tales, and gossipy news that characterized them (Storer 8). Here again, as in the case of Procopius, an author affiliated with a ruling institution is the source of (or, also like Procopius, the first to inscribe) texts that are irreverent towards that institution.[77]

Facetiae were also among the first printed texts to contain explicitly parodic engagements of other genres. The early seventeenth-century *Facetiae Facetarium*, for instance, which Andreevskii calls "the most extreme example" of the genre, presents typical *facetiae* in mock "scholarly" form (776). Parody, writes one cultural historian, was a key element of the medieval culture of humor in Europe and Russia, and was only later superseded by modern modes of humorous discourse such as satire (Farrell 564).

Like the historical anecdote, the *facetia* and related humorous written texts came relatively late to Russia. The Petrine era saw a flowering of such literature in both published and manuscript form (Kokorev 217). Such material was initially accessible only to readers who

[77] Another such figure of the time was Heinrich Bebel (1472-1516), who published a German collection similar to Poggio's while serving as poet laureate to Emperor Maximilian. Baron von Munchausen represents a similar figure in European and Russian cultural history, and is particularly significant in late Soviet culture because of a 1980 film adaptation of the Munchausen story that became (like many period pieces in Soviet film) a means to camouflage *anekdoty* about contemporary themes. In the Soviet period, Bolshevik politburo member Karl Radek was rumored in the 1920s and 1930s to be the source of *anekdoty* about Stalin, perhaps one reason he (unlike Procopius, Poggio, and Bebel) ultimately fell out of favor with the ruler and was executed.

knew Latin or Polish, but translations soon appeared. Anthologies typically included narratives of various lengths and types. A 1680 collection entitled *Smekhotvornye povesti* [*Laughable Tales*], for instance, contained *facetiae*, longer stories, and a chapter from *The Decameron*. Humorous narratives in Russia were associated with such anthologies well into the nineteenth century. The translated works were popular mostly among the educated classes—scholars, students, officers, etc.—until the early nineteenth century, when the upper crust began to abandon such "low" forms in favor of the emerging culture of high literature (the process that inspired Pushkin, Viazemskii, et al., to take measures to preserve the salon *anekdot* and other such forms). Short humorous genres thus were left to lower classes such as petty bureaucrats, merchants, and peasants (Kokorev 218-19). Anthologies began to appear mostly in the simplistic chapbook format known as *lubochnaia literatura*, illustrated with woodcut prints.[78] The most popular collection was *Starichok-vesel'chak* [The Jolly Old Man], first published in 1789 and reprinted repeatedly and almost unaltered for over a century (Khrul' 31). As a type of literature intended for and consumed (though not produced) by the folk, *anekdoty* and other texts in the *lubok* form came into contact with the folkloric corpus. There they supplemented and merged with existing oral forms (Pel'ttser 76), including the folk *anekdot* and the folktale. The *anekdot*'s "exile" from high culture also isolated it from the scrutiny of censors, official and unofficial alike, fomenting its rise as an expedient medium for clandestine discourse (Grossman 45). The folk *anekdot*, as a descendant of the "profane" forms that coexisted in Russian culture with mythological and, later, Christian narratives, had long functioned as just such a medium, and its intermingling with the above-examined forms in the nineteenth century contributed to its subsequent emergence as the most productive Russian oral genre of the twentieth century.

[78] See Zorkaia, *Fol'klor* and Farrell on the place of *lubochnaia literatura* in Russian popular culture.

2.5. THE HISTORICAL ANECDOTE

Centuries before the word *anekdot* appeared in Russian, its etymological ancestors (initially only the Latin *anecdota*, but soon its cognates in the modern European languages, as well) were in common use in Western European letters. In Gutenberg's day, the term was still being used as Suidas had used it five hundred years earlier: in the titles of books containing previously unpublished classical texts (*Anecdota graeca*, *Anecdota graeco-byzantina*, etc. [Belousov, "Ot sostavitelia" 4]). Its semantic field soon expanded, however, to include not only newly published ancient writings but newly inscribed, previously uncited historical occurrences. In this form, the anecdote became a prominent genre of Renaissance historiography. Like the first work to bear the name, these anecdotes were accounts of small but memorable and characteristic events in the lives of elites, usually royalty or military leaders. They were presented and received as depictions of actual events, a form of miniature historiography that complemented histories of more momentous happenings, and also lent a tone of humanity and immediacy to the biographies of important figures. The novelty of the information in historical anecdotes was the most significant defining feature of the genre at this stage in its development, when it had tactical value in the professional competition among historians, who would report (and sometimes invent) new information for the sake of originality (Pel'ttser 57).

As *The Secret History* demonstrates, the latter-day association of the anecdote with non-conformist thought has ancient origins. Unlike Procopius's unambiguously anti-establishment book, however, later historical anecdotes typically echo the lionizing tone of larger historiographic works. The political conformism of the genre persisted for some time, and is certainly present in most of the texts published in Russia under the rubric *anekdoty* in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In Western Europe and, later, Russia, historical

anecdotes were often published together with examples of other short genres, such as the parable and the apothegm (a terse, instructive saying or maxim) in anthologies intended to encourage the reader to behave virtuously by emulating great personages. Such collections were widely known in Europe beginning in the sixteenth century, and entered Russia via Poland in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, several decades before the word *anekdot* became part of the Russian language. One of the first was the Polish collection *Apothegmata*, which was published in Poland at the end of the sixteenth century and appeared in Russian translation in 1711, during the reign of Peter the Great, with the subtitle *Three Volumes of Short, Rhetorical, Edifying Tales. Included Therein are Various Questions and Answers, Lives, and Deeds, Words, and Conversations of Various Ancient Philosophers. Translated from the Polish by Order of His Majesty, the Tsar* (Pel'ttser 58).

While the secularly homiletic tone of the historical anecdote was a renaissance-era development, its mechanics and many of its compositional elements are traceable to classical antiquity, when short genres such as the legend, the apothegm, the fable, and the tale served rhetorical purposes similar to that of the contemporary *anekdot*: to express an idea in a captivating, distilled utterance uncluttered by abstraction or extended explication (Chekunova, “Poiavlenie” 131; Kurganov, *Anekdot kak zhanr* 7). The frequent presence of surprise endings in these genres, as well as their brevity, made them modally flexible, i.e., adaptable to both comic and serious subjects. Indeed, the earliest Russian compilers of translated apothegms emphasized the co-presence in the texts of *dulce* and *utile*. In 1764 a St. Petersburg teacher named Petr Semenov published an anthology of translated texts with a lengthy title:

> *Товарищ разумный и замысловатый, или Собрание хороших слов, разумных замыслов, скорых ответов, учитивых насмешек и приятных приключений знатных мужей древнего и нынешнего веков. Переведенный с французского*

и умноженый из разных латинских к сей же материи принадлежащих писателей как для пользы, так и для увеселения общества. (Chekunova, "Poiavlenie" 133)[79]

Native Russian historical *anekdoty* began to appear a few decades after the first translations of Polish collections. Peter the Great himself, whose reforms had introduced a plethora of socio-political and cultural ideas unprecedented in Russia, was, naturally, among the first native subjects of the genre of choice for communicating previously-unknown information. Despite their association with the reforms, however, early (and many later) Russian historical *anekdoty*, like the genre's older, European counterpart, affirm the status quo in no uncertain terms. One 1809 collection, for instance, has another concise title:

> *Анекдоты руские, или великие достопамятные деяния и добродетельные примеры славных мужей, полководцов, гражданских чиновников, купечества и других особ всякого звания, отличившихся героическою твердостию, неустрашимостию духа, усердием, благотворительностию, истинною правотою дел своих и другими многими примерами непоколебимой преверженности к вере, государю и любви к отечеству.* (Kux 10-11)[80]

Compilers of these *anekdoty* obtained (or claimed to obtain) their material from interviews with firsthand witnesses (or their descendants) to the actions of the historical

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[79] "A Reasonable and Complex Companion, or A Collection of Good Words, Reasoned Ideas, Quick Retorts, Well-considered Jests and Pleasant Adventures of Renowned Men of Antiquity and the Current Age, Translated from French and Supplemented with Similar Material by Latin Writers for Both the Benefit and the Amusement of Society."

[80] "Russian Anecdotes, or Great Memorable Actions and Virtuous Examples of Glorious Men of Russia, Renowned Monarchs, Military Commanders, Civil Servants, Merchants and Other Individuals of All Callings, Distinguished by Their Heroic Firmness, Intrepid Spirit, Zeal, Philanthropy, the True Rightness of Their Affairs and Many Other Examples of the Unwavering Devotion to Faith, the Monarch and Love for the Fatherland." The expanded social range of the categories of protagonists listed in the title indicates the changes already underway in the historical *anekdot* by the beginning of the nineteenth century.

personages depicted. They also found material in letters and other documents, but the firsthand sources were considered a hallmark of the genre. Even though the very use of the word *anekdot* purported the veracity of the information presented, publishers sometimes emphasized that veracity more explicitly by highlighting the method of collection in a title, for example the 1788 book *Anecdotes about Emperor Peter the Great, Heard from Various Individuals and Collected by Iakov Shtelin* (Nevskaia 79).

Russian historical *anekdoty* depict their VIP protagonists displaying those qualities most emblematic of occupants of their positions. In *anekdoty* about monarchs, for example, the ruler typically demonstrates his or her wisdom, magnanimity, and/or good humor with a comment or action that fulfills a textual function similar to that of a punch line:

> После Полтавской победы Петр I пригласил однажды пленных офицеров к своему столу и, при питии за здравие, сказал: "Пью за здравие моих учителей в военном искусстве!" Шведский фельдмаршал Рейншильд спросил при этом, кого он удостаивает таким названием. –"Вас, господа". – "В таком случае Ваше Величество очень неблагодарны, поступив так дурно со своими учителями". Государю так понравился этот ответ, что он немедленно велел возвратить Рейншильду его шпагу. (Krivoshlyk 9-10)[81]
>
> Государь <Петр I>, заседая однажды в Сенате и слушая дела о различных воровствах, за несколько дней до того случившихся, в гневе своем клялся пресечь оные и тотчас сказал тогдашнему генерал-прокурору Павлу Ивановичу Ягужинскому: "Сейчас напиши от моего имени указ во все государство такого содержания: что если кто и на столько украдет, что можно купить веревку, то, без дальнейшего следствия, повешен будет". Генерал-прокурор, выслушав строгое повеление, взялся было уже за перо, но несколько поудержавшись, отвечал монарху: "Подумайте, Ваше Величество, какие следствия будет иметь такой указ?" "Пиши,—прервал

[81] "After his victory [against the Swedes] at the battle of Poltava, Peter I [the Great] invited some captured officers to his table. He proposed a toast: 'I drink to the health of my military teachers!' The Swedish field marshal, Reinschild, asked Peter whom he favored to call by such a name. 'You, sirs,' was Peter's reply. 'In that case, Your Majesty has shown his teachers terrible ingratitude [on the battlefield].' The ruler was so pleased by Reinschild's retort that he immediately ordered that the field marshal's saber be returned to him."

> годударь,—что я тебе приказал". Ягужинский все еще не писал и наконец с улыбкою сказал монарху: "Всемилостивейший государь! Неужели ты хочешь остаться императором один, без служителей и подданных? Все мы воруем, с тем только различием, что один более и приметнее, нежели другой". Государь, погруженный в свои мысли, услышав такой забавный ответ, рассмеялся и замолчал. (Bantysh-Kamenskii 568, qtd. in Kurganov, *Russkii literaturnyi anekdot* 9)[82]

These two *anekdoty* show Peter reacting not only with restraint but with a sense of humor to retorts that might provoke rage and punishment from a less enlightened leader.[83] In other *anekdoty* the sovereign herself, Catherine the Great, is the source of a witty remark:

> Графиня Браницкая, заметив, что Екатерина II, против обыкновения, нюхает табак левою рукою, пожелала узнать причину. Екатерина ответила ей: — Как царь-баба, часто даю целовать руку и нахожу непристойным всех душить табаком. (Krivoshlyk 29)[84]

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[82] "His Majesty [Peter the Great], attending a session of the Senate one day, became incensed upon hearing of various thefts that had recently occurred. He angrily vowed to put the thievery to an end, saying to his prosecutor general, Pavel Ivanovich Iaguzhinskii: 'Draft this very minute a decree in my name to the whole country, stating that anyone who steals an amount sufficient to buy a rope shall be summarily hanged.' The prosecutor general, pen in hand, listened to the stern order, but hesitated. He replied to the monarch: 'Your Highness, have you considered the probable consequences of such a decree?' 'Write what I ordered you to write,' the sovereign interrupted him. Still, Iaguzhinskii did not start writing, and finally smiled and said to the monarch: 'Most Gracious Sovereign! Do you really want to be an emperor without servants or subjects? We all steal, only some steal more than others, and more obviously.' His Majesty, who had been deep in thought, heard this amusing answer, burst out laughing, and fell silent."

[83] More than two centuries after Peter's death another leader would also be the subject of sanctioned narratives that highlighted his kindness and mercy. Stalin's image in the *anekdot* tradition, of course, ridicules his official image, but, interestingly, does not deprive him the pleasure of exercising his power over life and death in just as whimsical a manner as Peter (see the sneezing joke in Chapter Two).

[84] "Countess Branitskaia, noticing that Catherine II [the Great] took snuff with her left hand rather than her right, as was the custom, asked the reason. Catherine replied: 'As a woman tsar [*tsar'-baba*], I must frequently offer my hand to be kissed, and I consider it unseemly to suffocate everyone with the odor of tobacco.'"

In Russia, anthologies of short, anecdotal texts were widely read, both in printed and manuscript copies, and heard in church (though not the three cited above, most likely), where clergy would recite them aloud as illustrations of religious concepts. They were also recommended for recitation by military officers to their soldiers and by landowners to their serfs (Nevskaia 79).

Categorizing this apparently "unscholarly" text type as a form of historiography is not unusual, considering the accepted nature and purpose of that field at the time. Recorded history was not expected to be a detached, balanced account of events in sequence, but an object lesson, an exemplary narrative that derived its didactic authority from its veracity. Its most important subject was human character, and the most proper historical examples of desirable character traits were those of the men and women who made history: rulers, royalty, aristocrats, and military heroes (Kux 42). The *anekdot* collection as a historiographic document also served to "portray and, by extension, promote stability," since there was no discernible temporal progression from text to text, which gave the impression of static time (Kux 8). The behavior of the protagonists was also stable, even predictable, from one *anekdot* to the next (Kux 7).

Aware of the appeal of lively storytelling and the limited effect of overly tendentious (and "stable") didacticism, compilers sometimes included colloquial, humorous, and even obscene texts in their collections. The anthologized texts typically had an unambiguous moral added on, but not always:

> Старушка в церкви поставила две свечки. Одну перед образом св. Михаила, а другую перед пораженным дьяволом. Заметил это дьячок и сказал ей:
> —Ах, что ты делаешь, бабушка, ведь ты эту свечу ставишь перед дьяволом.
> Она ему на то:
> —Не замай, батюшка, не худо иметь везде друзей, в раю и в муке. Мы еще не знаем, где будем. (N.G. Kurganov 158, qtd. in Sidel'nikov, "Ideino-khudozhestvennaia spetsifika 30)[85]

[85] "An old woman places two candles in church: one in front of an icon of St. Michael, another one in front of an image of the devil. The deacon notices this and says to her: 'Hey, what are you doing, old

The popular reception of these texts was highly discriminating, writes Pel'ttser: "People were not interested in the moral of the story, and retained only the *anekdot*, as a form of amusement" (59). Especially popular texts from anthologies subsequently became part of the Russian oral tradition, a process which, considered alongside the fact that many of the anthologized texts themselves descended from the oral traditions of European and Eastern antiquity, testifies to the increasingly complicated relationship between oral and written culture that emerged during the Petrine era. That process also exemplifies what Bogatyrev and Jakobson dub "prophylactic censorship," a sort of textual analog to natural selection that characterizes a community's engagement of its own corpus of oral culture; texts of little or diminished interest to the folk are not rehearsed and therefore fade into oblivion (37). In the Soviet period, people would also engage in selective consumption of cultural forms, for example immortalizing certain film protagonists or literary icons in discrete *anekdot* cycles while ignoring others.

Although the *anekdot*'s didactic function and its thematic emphasis on factual events from the lives of historical figures remained strong in Russia well into the nineteenth century, even by the late-eighteenth century the scope of the term was expanding to include "interesting, isolated facts and short, witty little stories notable for their freshness and levity" (Pel'ttser 57). The change in the *anekdot*'s semantic sphere of reference was in part a synecdochic reemphasis on one subcategory of the genre, humorous historical *anekdoty*, which began to increase in number and influence when Russia's first professional writers started composing them. The shift was also partly due to an expansion of the term *anekdot* to include humorous texts previously known only by other names such as *kratkie zamyslovatye povesti* ["short complex tales"]

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woman? You're putting that candle in front of the devil.' And she says to him: 'Don't touch it, father. It's not a bad idea to have friends everywhere, in heaven and in hell. After all, we don't know where we're going to end up.'"

(Belousov, “Ot sostavitelia” 5). Finally, the change reflected the influence of the folk *anekdot* and other types of folk narrative, which were populated by fictional, archetypal characters, on the historical *anekdot*, with its real-life personalities. As I shall demonstrate in Chapter Two, the mutual superimposition of the protagonists of these two categories of narrative would become a prominent marker of the Soviet-era *anekdot*, a descendent of both.

2.6. THE LITERARY *ANEKDOT*

The florescence of Russian literary culture in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries changed the connotative scope of the word *anekdot* in ways that set the genre on a path towards its twentieth-century significance as: 1) a medium for commentary on domestic current events and issues; and 2) the major oral genre of a highly literate population. By the 1790s *anekdoty* with Russian themes and protagonists had begun to gain ground on the still-more-popular translated European anecdotes. As they strove to develop a truly native literary language, Russian writers also began to encourage the use of native Russian subjects and themes in literature. Oral culture played a significant role in this drive for literary innovation; Nikolai Karamzin’s advice to his fellow authors in 1802 was to “write as we speak” (“Otchego v Rossii malo avtorskikh talantov,” qtd. in Kux 22).

Interest in the particularities of the Russian ethnos competed with the obtaining neo-classical emphasis on universal human character. Proponents of a more nationally introspective literature pointed out that Russia , in this regard, was somewhat behind the West, where Romanticism had taken root. In 1793 Ivan Krylov, who would later become Russia’s most renowned fabulist, co-wrote the following with A.I. Klushin in the first issue of Krylov’s journal, *The St. Petersburg Mercury*:

> Every nation gives justifiable recognition to the great deeds of its native sons, and every nation passes on to posterity its citizens' smallest adventures, notable for their magnificence or peculiarity: many volumes of French, English, and German anecdotes have been published. Is it really the case that Russians have done so much less, both good and bad, than other nations? Is it really the case that we do not have a single anecdote that in some way captures the character of the nation? Of course we have such anecdotes, but they are not paid any attention. We searched and inquired and found a great many of them. Why not share them with the public? They will doubtlessly provide a certain pleasure for our readers. (Krylov and Klushin 82-83, qtd. in Chekunova 143)[86]

The authors who dominated Russian literature at the end of the eighteenth and the first decades of the nineteenth century—most notably (though not exclusively) Aleksandr Pushkin (1799-1837) and other writers associated with Russian Romanticism—agreed with Krylov and embraced the native historical *anekdot* as a genre capable of expressing both their keen interest in Russian history and their aesthetic values. Poets and prosaists increasingly incorporated Russian history into their stories, novels, and verse. Several wrote non-fiction works—for example, Karamzin's multi-volume *History of the Russian State* (1818-29), Nikolai Polevoi's *History of the Russian People* (1829-33), and Pushkin's *History of Pugachev* (1833). Writers also began composing and collecting *anekdoty*, the most notable examples being Pushkin's *Table-Talk* (1835-36) and Petr Viazemskii's *Old Notebook* (1870s).

With their conscious departure from the rationalism that characterized the neo-classical period, writers were attracted by the *anekdot*'s flexibility and potential for artistic representation of real-life events. The literary *anekdot* popular in Pushkin's day was a transitional stage in the genre's evolution, in that it was no longer a presumably factual story, and not yet necessarily a funny one (Belousov, "Ot sostavitelia" 7). In the new aesthetic and intellectual atmosphere, "the

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[86] Gerlovan writes that Russian authors of tales took on a similar project: "seeing the resemblance of translated tales and novels to Russian folk compositions, [Russian writers] set themselves the task of creating 'Slavic,' 'Russian' tales in order to expose the reader to a familiar and at the same time unfamiliar world" (100).

anecdote's function shift[ed]," writes Kux, as Pushkin and others began to "use anecdotes to create subjective, if not idiosyncratic, accounts of history and historical figures" (2). Compare the above-cited *anekdoty* about Peter the Great, for example, with the following, from Pushkin's *Table-Talk*:

> Однажды маленький арап, сопровождавший Петра I в его прогулке, остановился за некоторою нуждой и вдруг закричал в испуге: "Государь! Государь! Из меня кишка лезет". Петр подошел к нему и увидя, в чем дело, сказал: "Врешь: это не кишка, а глиста" – и выдернул глисту своими пальцами. Анекдот довольно не чист, но рисует обычаи Петра. (95)[87]

This text is notable not only for the scatological subject matter but also for Pushkin's inclusion of reflexive authorial commentary on the *anekdot*.

Russian literati began to study traditional folk genres such as the folktale, the ballad, and the *anekdot* in order more authentically to "translate [them] into the language of literary creation" (Kurganov, *Literaturnyi anekdot* 36). Karamzin and other prominent writers of his day, including Gavrila Derzhavin (1743-1816), Aleksandr Radishchev (1749-1802), Pushkin, and even empress Catherine the Great (r. 1762-96),[88] composed literary folktales. Their retooling of the historical *anekdot* (which literary historians of the period usually call the "literary *anekdot*") was accomplished through the filter of their knowledge of and fondness for native folklore.[89]

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[87] "One day a black servant boy accompanying Peter I on his walk stopped to attend to certain needs. He suddenly cried out in fright: 'Sovereign! Sovereign! My guts are crawling out of me!' Peter went up to him, realized what was happening, said 'That's not true: it's not your guts, it's a tapeworm,' and pulled the worm out with his fingers. Not a very clean *anekdot*, but it depicts Peter's mannerisms."

[88] Catherine composed two tales—"The Tale of Tsarevich Khlore" and "The Tale of Tsarevich Fevei"—in addition to her numerous plays.

[89] Kux writes that folk elements were sometimes "superficially and/or consciously included to lend a pseudo-folk flavor" to literary compositions (6).

The “natural habitat” of the *anekdot* changed after the genre began to be adopted by writers. As part of the process of Westernization initiated by Peter and continued by his successors (especially Catherine the Great in the last third of the eighteenth century), Russia imported a salon culture in which oral consumption of historical anecdotes (as well as other “miniature genres” such as the “epigram, fable, aphorism, madrigal, literary letter [and] inscription on portraits” [Grossman 46]) was common. The European-style salon anecdote “collided” in the literary salons of St. Petersburg and Moscow with the native folk *anekdot*, resulting in a new, distinctly Russian form (Kurganov, “U nas” 3). Although the “new” genre still featured real-life protagonists, the range of social and professional categories deserving immortalization through *anekdoty* expanded to include not only monarchs and generals, but also literati, artists, and composers.

The discursive function of the genre began to change as well, especially as political intellectualism became increasingly associated with writers and artists. The comment by the civic-minded poet and publisher Nikolai Nekrasov cited in the epigraph to this chapter indicates that the *anekdot* had become a favored (indeed, indispensable) medium for critical discourse and opinionated intellectual exchange. The capacity of literary *anekdoty* for automatic, knee-jerk contradiction is shared by the traditional folk *anekdot*, for which discursive conflict is also a crucial constituent feature. Roman Jakobson writes of his encounter early in the twentieth century with a “genuine master of the anecdote” in a village, who told him:

> When I come into an inn and people are arguing, and someone calls, “There is a God!” and I, to him, “You lie, son of a cur,”—then I tell him a tale to prove it, until the *muzhiks* say: “You’re right. There is no God.” But again I have to fire back: “Nonsense!” And I tell them a tale about God [. . .]. I can tell tales only to get back at folks. (647)

A definition of the word *anekdot* from the *Dictionary of Russian Synonyms or Soslovov* (1840) confirms the growing critical and analytical potential of the form, noting that it can "illuminate the secrets of politics and literature or lay bare the hidden springs of events" (18, qtd. in Kux 41).[90] The Soviet *anekdot* would fulfill a similar function, often on an ironic level, positing possible yet patently absurd "springs" that might lie beneath the surface of an otherwise inexplicable socio-political reality.

As an oral form, *anekdoty* in Russian literary culture of the early-nineteenth century represented a prototype of what Borev would later dub—in reference to the Soviet underground *anekdot*—"the folklore of the intelligentsia" (*XX vek* 1: 3). The *anekdot*'s status as an oral genre—an ephemeral form "so easily exhaled and forgotten" (Kurganov, "U nas" 3)—in an increasingly literary culture led to efforts by Pushkin and others to record and preserve examples of the *anekdot*, both as aesthetic artifacts and as repositories of information worthy of inscription in the national memory. Their efforts took on a particular urgency, writes Kurganov, after the failed Decembrist overthrow of the Russian monarchy in 1825, which significantly discredited the educated urban nobility whose members had led or supported it. The uprising's aftermath changed the "unwritten laws of public behavior" ("U nas" 3) and the socio-political dynamics of St. Petersburg and Moscow, so the salon culture that had been central to social and intellectual life lost its former influence. The *anekdot* was deprived of its major cultural context, and therefore much of its aura as a full-fledged literary genre. It started to become an informal, "everyday" form of expression, and thus less substantial ("U nas" 3). Another influence on the decline in the status of the literary *anekdot* was the commercialization of Russian literature, the migration of literary forms and activity "from the salon [. . .] into the marketplace" (Kux 3).

[90] Grossman points out the intriguing fact that Karl Marx's first political article was published in a Zurich philosophical anthology called *Anecdota* (46).

Consequently, written and folk *anekdoty* were increasingly consumed in the same cultural contexts, resulting in further intermingling of the genre's various evolutionary strands. Pushkin and others recognized these processes and endeavored to rescue the *anekdot* as an example of salon culture, with its refined "art of social intercourse" (Kurganov, "U nas" 4).

As it gained popularity among the creative intelligentsia, the literary *anekdot* grew more reliant on humor than the earlier historical *anekdot* had been, though humor was not yet its defining feature. The changing aesthetic of literary creation and the surging interest in introspection on both national and personal levels created a growing premium on humor, testifying to Henri Bergson's assertion that "the comic comes into being just when society and the individual [. . .] begin to regard themselves as works of art" (24). Like the above-quoted historical *anekdoty* about Peter and Catherine, literary *anekdoty* were often constructed around a *bon mot*, though by a writer or artist as often as by a monarch:

> Дельвиг однажды вызвал на дуэль Булгарина. Булгарин отказался, сказав: "Скажите барону Дельвигу, что я на своем веке видел более крови, нежели он чернил." (Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie* 12: 159, qtd. in Kurganov, *Literaturnyi anekdot* 199)[91]
>
> Однажды в мастерскую к Брюллову приехало какое-то семейство и пожелало видеть ученика его Н. А. Рамазанова. Брюллов послал за ним. Когда он пришел, то Брюллов, обращаясь к посетителям, произнес:
> —Рекомендую – пьяница.
> — А это – мой профессор. (Kurganov and Okhotin 206)[92]

[91] "Del'vig [poet and close friend of Pushkin] once challenged Bulgarin [another writer] to a duel. Bulgarin declined, saying, 'tell Baron Del'vig that I have seen more blood in my day than he has seen ink.'"

[92] "One day a family came to [the painter] Briullov's studio and asked to see his student, N.A. Ramazanov. Briullov sent for him. When he arrived Briullov said to the guests, 'allow me to introduce to you a drunkard.' Ramazanov pointed to Briullov and said coldly, 'and this is my teacher.'"

In addition to the *anekdot*'s newfound status as an independent genre, it acquired a new relationship with larger, more traditional literary genres. Definitions of *anekdot* in Soviet dictionaries of literary terminology acknowledge this relationship, characterizing the *anekdot* as a sort of neutral "seed" event or situation (*fabula*) that a skilled verbal artist develops into a story, novella, or novel (*siuzhet*) (Dolgopolova, "The Contrary World" 1). The best-known example of this in Russian literature is Pushkin's donation of two fictional anecdotes to the young Nikolai Gogol', narrative "seeds" that Gogol' cultivated into his masterpieces, the comedy *Revizor* [The Inspector General, 1836] and the picaresque novel (labeled a *poema* [long narrative poem] by Gogol') *Mertvye dushi* [Dead Souls, 1842]. Gogol' had solicited the contribution in an 1835 letter to Pushkin: "Do me a favor and give me some plot; whether it's amusing or not amusing doesn't matter as long as it's a purely Russian anecdote" (Gogol 52). In hindsight, it is perhaps no surprise that Soviet reference books would favor this definition of the *anekdot* as a "small" verbal form, raw material for "higher" genres. Such a perception underplays the growing power of the term in Soviet everyday culture, and describes a process that is the direct opposite of the contemporary, unofficial connotation of the term not as an atomistic, preliminary text but as a finished product, a terminal, stylized, and subjective distillation of images, icons, relationships, and speech forms from a larger narrative: the whole of socio-political reality. Soviet Marxist teleology would demand that such a potentially mischievous form of discourse be labeled an obsolete proto-genre, rather than regarded as a sophisticated culmination of popular creative thought.

The various applications over centuries of the word *anekdot* to texts from a wide range of discursive spheres (history, biography, homiletics, pedagogy, literature, humor) and with different media of transmission (books, private manuscripts, verbatim recitation, improvised oral

performance) certainly despecified the term. But the legacy of what Sally Kux calls the *anekdot*'s "formal indeterminacy" and "functional plurality" (12) would ultimately be to the genre's evolutionary advantage in the environment of aggressively manipulated and manufactured verbal culture that began in earnest in the 1930s. The engineers of Soviet cultural production understood the power of myth and employed it in the archaic sense, as a grand narrative of origins and a source of comprehensive discursive authority. In Chapter Two I examine how the Soviet-era *anekdot* fulfilled a meta-mythological function, as it satirized a political mythology reliant on folkloric models of discourse. The rise of the contemporary *anekdot* in Russia was not solely a result of Bolshevism, however, but also of related, earlier (and larger) processes: urbanization and modernization, which had already begun to engender novel cultural forms by the time Marxism-Leninism became the primary influence on the verbal repertoire of Russian culture.

3.0. CHAPTER TWO: TRADITION AND CONTEMPORANEITY

> Power is amorphous; myth gives it form.
> —Gilbert Morris Cuthbertson (xxi)
>
> Чем настойчивее заказывают эпос, тем
> вероятнее появление анекдотов.
> —I. Shaitanov (19)[93]

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the *anekdot* had evolved into a form of popular expression well suited to the socio-cultural and even the physical environment of the city, with its demographic density, staccato rhythms, and dynamic sensory and cognitive stimuli. The genre was an increasingly prominent part of a generically and stylistically diverse pre-revolutionary popular culture that Richard Stites describes as "an amalgam of folk, high, and light urban entertainment genres of old Russia in a context of commercialism, the quickening of technology, [. . .] and increased contact with foreign culture" (4). The "amalgamated" quality of cultural life to which Stites refers was a seminal contributing factor in the steep ascent of the *anekdot*, whose own rather motley pedigree broadened the genre's potential for engagement with other cultural forms and deployment in a variety of situations. The literary-historical *anekdot*'s popularity among Russian literati in the previous century, in confluence with the oral *anekdot*'s emergent prominence in the culture of "the folk" (who would have an unprecedented level of participation in and influence on urban verbal culture by the eve of the Revolution), gave the

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[93] "The more insistent the call for the epic, the more likely the appearance of *anekdoty*." A.F. Sedov makes a similar observation: "the more an issue is inflated by Officialdom, the more probable the appearance of *anekdoty* about it" (5).

contemporary genre a multifaceted utility and appeal in the population centers where "history" takes place. The wave of socio-political sea changes about to beset the country would create an atmosphere in which the rise in the *anekdot*'s cultural stock could only accelerate. In this chapter I consider the *anekdot*'s emerging status as a constituent genre of Russian—and, a bit later, Soviet—urban popular culture, and the textual and extratextual factors that fortified that status. In Chapter Three I turn to the place of the fully "ripened" genre in the (equally ripe) atmosphere of 1960s—early-1980s Soviet culture.

3.1. THE URBAN(IZED) *ANEKDOT*

The institutionalization of Bolshevism was predated (and, of course, influenced) by another dramatic change in Russian social reality that made its own contributions to the *anekdot*'s cultural significance: mass urbanization. The total urban population of Russia tripled between 1863 and 1913. The emancipation of the serfs in 1861 had given peasants unprecedented freedom of movement and, by the end of the century, the number of Russian city-dwellers with peasant backgrounds had increased by nearly 400% (Vishnevskii 83).[94] Many of these urbanized peasants held temporary passports that allowed them to retain land and homes in their villages while working or doing business in the city, which meant that the link between rural and urban was not simply one of historical demographic change, but an ongoing, physical fact. The respective forms of popular culture associated with the two "habitats" commingled with an intensity that matched that of the migrations themselves. The steep rise in the literacy rate

[94] For their part, Soviet ethnographers rejected the distinction between rural and urban as late as 1984, objecting that such a dichotomy "presupposes the dismemberment of what is the genetically singular culture of an ethnos" (Budina and Shmeleva 73). Downplaying or denying the rural-urban social divide was an important element of the official view of the Soviet Union as a worker-peasant state.

following emancipation contributed to the process of cultural intercourse, as well. The decades between emancipation and the October Revolution, writes Jeffrey Brooks, saw the rapid development of "a popular culture based on common literacy" (*When Russia Learned to Read* xiii). The literate peasants, he continues, "tended [. . .] to divide all books into two categories, the godly and the humorous. The Scriptures were the model for the first sort of text, and the frivolous fairy tale the exemplar of the second. The fairy tale was ungodly, untrue, useless, amusing, and uninstructive" (32). As "godliness" became less of a necessary element in Russian letters (and completely anathema after 1917) its "frivolous" counterpart was, if briefly, free to come to the fore of folk (and, increasingly, urban) cultural consumption.

Although the rural-urban connection in Russian culture began to accelerate as never before at the end of the nineteenth century, however, it certainly did not originate then. The frequency of urban themes and settings in folktales, ballads, historical songs, and other traditional folk genres attests that the cultural symbiosis of village and city is in fact a centuries-old phenomenon (in some part traceable to the traveling *skomorokhi* I discuss in Chapter One). The influence of professional written culture (which in Russia, as elsewhere, has always been largely urban) on oral forms such as religious verse, the legend, and the folktale also predates by centuries the mass urban migrations of the peasantry that began after emancipation (Nekliudov 2).

Yet if the influence of the city and its culture on Russian folklore was previously detectable primarily on a thematic level, the large-scale urbanization of the folk created opportunities for new kinds of cross-pollination. The rhythm and structure of newly generated folk texts, for instance, began to reflect the new temporal, spatial, and psychological contexts in which people were performing and consuming oral culture. The oral *anekdot* thrived especially

well in an urban environment. Kurganov cites the genre's signature formal features—its "dynamic, compact form" and its efficient "disregard of details, secondary episodes, and extraneous descriptions [in favor of] immediate presentation of the narrative nucleus"—as crucial factors in its big-city success (*Literaturnyi anekdot* 44). He likewise attributes to the urban influence the decisive emergence of the modern oral *anekdot* as a separate genre from the venerable master-genre of Russian oral culture, the folktale[95]:

> The city reduced and refined the folktale, plucked from it a single, short episode, gave it a tight, energetic rhythm, made the text dynamic (increasingly so as it approaches the end), and trained it to orient itself within and sense the pulse, the essence, of conversation. And the folktale gradually fell away, but the *anekdot* remained, a better match for the tempo of city life. (*Anekdot kak zhanr* 13)

Even the temporal and climatic environment in which city-dwellers lived hastened what Kurganov calls the "reduction" of the tale to *anekdot*-size; in rural Russia, the tale was traditionally a "winter genre," a means to pass time indoors during the cold months. The elasticity and repetitiveness of the tale, along with other so-called retardation devices, enhanced its value as such a pastime. The temporal and spatial categories of city life were sufficiently novel to shift the evolutionary advantage to different types of oral texts, and different circumstances for their consumption.[96]

The influence on verbal culture of the natural and social environment, of course, had always been significant, even determining. According to Pel'ttser, the original function of the

[95] One indication of official hostility towards the *anekdot* was the reluctance of Soviet folkloristics to grant the folk *anekdot* full genre status. It was consistently (though not exclusively – see Sidel'nikov, "Ideino-khudozhestvennaia spetsifika," for example) classified as a sub-genre of the everyday tale.

[96] Although it is much shorter than the folktale, the *anekdot*—in the form of long, open-ended sessions in which they are told *en masse* in an associative chain—has served a similar function, especially during Stagnation, when marathon *anekdot*-telling was a common pastime in the insular collectives that characterized the period. See Chapter Three.

myths and other forms of narrative that lay at the source of folkloric expression was to respond collectively to natural, elemental forces outside human control: “The questions that primitive man posed to himself regarding his natural environment could not be answered by dispassionate reason, which did not yet have a foundation in positivistic knowledge; answers came instead in the form of youthfully naïve fantasy, at times playful and at times lofty” (63). Often the “playful” impulse took its semantic cues not directly from the “natural environment,” but from other extant textual material, and specifically material reflecting the opposite end of Pel'ttser’s implied stylistic continuum: texts that aspire to discursive “loftiness.” As the ludic element of cultural expression grew stronger over time, that element came to serve as a sort of internal control (or purgative) mechanism by which a culture could turn back on itself—reflexivity in its etymologically literal meaning—and regard its own formative tropes, images, and premises. Humor—as contained in short genres such as the *anekdot* in particular—was a key mode for this type of meta-cultural redaction. Meletinskii interprets folk *anekdoty* as “a comic reaction to the mythological impressions of primitive folklore. They discredit the obsolete and moribund features of primitive ideology” (*Geroi volshebnoi skazki* 239, qtd. in Iudin 10).[97]

3.2. META-MYTHOLOGY, META-FOLKLORE

The new authoritative knowledge after 1917 was articulated using linguistic devices, imagery, and strategies informed by the same representational font to which the *anekdot* had ready access: the folkloric tradition and its origins in myth. The verbal performance of the ideology of the radiant future was deeply invested in the past. The vestigial presence in latter-day folklore (such

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[97] Meletinskii’s use of the word “moribund” recalls Bergson’s characterization of laughter as a means of purging, through “corrective” laughter, organic formations, institutions, and phenomena that have been overlaid with inflexible, non-lifelike attributes or accoutrements (82).

as the *anekdot*) of *its* own myth-oriented heritage, in turn, "genetically" predisposed it to be a medium for critical engagement of mythological—and neo-mythological—discourse. With the aggressive employment of such discourse in an ideological form following the October Revolution, folklore had a new point of critical reference, one for the engagement of which the *anekdot*'s own archetypes and motifs proved highly useful.

Although some observers have interpreted the Soviets' political use of folkloric language primarily as a conscious appeal to the peasantry, [98] Julia Latynina sees a more fundamental link between Soviet ideology and archaic oral patterns. She refers to Soviet folkloric discourse as "the ideology's most adequate sublanguage," which she attributes to the fact that "the ideology itself is a pseudomorph of folklore," owing mainly to its similar emphasis on collective over individual creativity (79). She cites numerous examples, including representations of Stalin as "the never-setting sun of the Party" (83) and "the greatest gardener" in the "flowering garden of Communism" (80), VDNKh [the Exhibition of Economic Achievements] as a fairy-tale kingdom (81), Lenin as a "mountain eagle" (83), and a tale in which "a medal, presented by Stalin, is the magical means that three times saves the head of a collective farm from the machinations of the kulak antagonists" (82). The adoption of such language created an internal paradox within state discourse: the "mythologized form" of official texts "contradict[ed] the postulated rationality of their content" (Latynina 83).[99] Another way of referring to the same immanent structural tension

[98] Katerina Clark writes that the Russian revolutionaries' use of traditional forms began in the second half of the nineteenth century, when authors of propagandistic tracts "imitated genres they believed would appeal to the masses: folktales, folk epics (byliny), short stories narrated as if told by a peasant or worker, and religious writings" (48-49). Such "fakeloric" texts did not provoke a counter-impulse in oral culture until they became institutionalized in mass culture following the Revolution.

[99] Writing from a more sovietological than folkloristic perspective, Christie Davies nevertheless identifies a similar "fundamental contradiction" in socialist societies "between the rational outlook engendered by

is in terms of tradition versus contemporaneity, two influences on thought and expression that the *anekdot*, in contrast to the neo-mythological ideology, successfully united within itself (Chirkova, *Poetika* 25).

The Soviet-era *anekdot* from the beginning merged a defining element of the literary-historical *anekdot*—portrayal of known, real-life figures—with motifs and structural features of traditional folk narrative, with its fools, devils, tricksters, and attention to everyday situations.[100] In the nineteenth century, written *anekdoty* almost exclusively depicted important and famous people—monarchs, politicians, writers, artists—while folk *anekdoty* dealt with everyday events and were populated by fictional, stereotypical characters (Chirkova 3-4). The Soviet political *anekdot* combined these two strands into a hybrid that often depicted an encounter between the famous and the anonymous, between the extraordinary and the mundane, between power [*vlast'*] and subject [*narod*]. The symbolic cross-breeding of historical personages and folk archetypes served not only to cast the former in a satirical light, but to engage with the ideology on the level of the ideology's own underlying, neo-mythological representational logic. The guiding influence of that logic is visible in the development of Soviet folkloristics. Early Soviet folklorists had a dual mission: to encourage the composition of (or themselves compose) folklore that would give credibility to the new ideology's claims of having "recreated the world," and to identify those elements of the existing tradition that should be preserved and cultivated. To extend (and do violence to) the botanical metaphor (which itself echoes similar metaphors in the

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modern processes of production, administration and scientific enquiry, and the irrational, arbitrary, muddled and obstructive exercise of power that emerges from their political system" ("Stupidity and Rationality" 21).

[100] There were certainly pre-revolutionary *anekdoty* about Russian royalty and other public figures, but they are mostly in the mold of the historical *anekdot*, i.e., based on purported actual moments from the subjects' lives.

neo-folkloric language used in the epithets cited by Latynina, above): the collectors and creators of the new folklore were attempting to "cultivate" on the site of thick, old-growth orchards, and had to cherry-pick among the range of extant folk forms and texts therein to limit the textual harvest to ideologically correct fruit. By contrast, as a vehicle for meta-folklore the *anekdot* could "harvest" entire orchards, or even burn them down, for its discursive potency is not diminished at all by the threat of internal contradiction. In fact, its potency is largely based on contradiction.

Soviet "fakelore" was far from the only species of official discourse to draw on the Russian oral tradition. Like other zealously ideological states, the Soviet Union committed its culture industry to aggressive myth-making projects in the interest of defining and inscribing, in its own terms, the origins of contemporaneity, and also in the interest of shoring up the discursive authority of its leaders and other emblematic personalities. In doing so, of course, it guaranteed a reliable font of material for the *anekdot* for over seventy years:

> —Давайте выпьем, Владимир Ильич!
> —Не могу, батенька, завязал. Вчера выпил на Финском вокзале, на броневик влез и такую галиматью нес, что до сих пор разобраться не могу!... (Romanov 7)[101]
>
> Гельмут Шмидт, Жискар д'Эстен и Брежнев хвалятся дорогими подарками. Шмидт показывает изящную табакерку с надписью "Дорогому Гельмуту от любящей жены".
> Д'Эстен — оригинальную трубку с надписью "Дорогому Жискару от француженки-патриотки".

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[101] "'Let's have a drink, Vladimir Il'ich!' 'I can't, old man, I'm on the wagon. Yesterday I drank a lot at the Finland Station, climbed up onto an armored car, and said such nonsense that I still can't figure out what happened!...'" Upon his return to Russia from exile in 1917, Lenin gave a speech at the Finland Station in Petrograd while standing atop an armored train car. The event—at which Lenin articulated the formative Bolshevik slogans that would be canonized as the April Theses—became a seminal episode in the Soviet state's creation mythology.

> Брежнев вынимает золотой портсигар с бриллиантом. Надпись: “Дорогому графу Уварову от великого князя Сергея Александровича”. (http://rels.obninsk.com/Rels/Lg/anecdote/zastoi.HTM)[102]

Anekdoty about political leaders and other Soviet heroes satirically demonstrated that official textual production had assigned them to the wrong genres, that Lenin, Dzerzhinskii, Kalinin, Chapaev, Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, et al. are characters more at home in the *anekdot* than in the heroic epic, the didactic parable, the exemplary tale, or the instructive proverb.[103] In this regard, the *anekdot* rehearsed one of the earliest processes in the evolution of verbal culture: the creation of “demonic/comic doubles” in response to, and in imitation of, the “cultural heroes” who populate myths (Meletinskii, “Skazka-anekdot” 59).

Political myth, like other varieties of myth, is often constructed as a formulaic expression of secret, authoritative knowledge held by an enhanced individual (who is in fact a supra-individual, emblematic of a collective). It is a form of discourse that “comes into play when rite, ceremony, or a social or moral rule demands justification, warrant of antiquity, reality or sanctity” (Malinowski 84, qtd. in Cuthbertson 3). Myth narrates cultural origins, and in particular the agency of “supernatural beings” present at—and responsible for—the creation of a reality, or a specific category or detail within that reality (Zipes 1). In its turn, the popular

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[102] “Helmut Schmidt, Giscard D’Estain, and Brezhnev are showing off their expensive gifts. Schmidt displays an exquisite snuff box with an inscription reading ‘To dear Helmut, from your loving wife.’ D’Estain has a distinctive pipe that reads ‘To dear Giscard, from a patriotic Frenchwoman.’ Brezhnev pulls out a gold cigarette box encrusted with diamonds, with an inscription that reads ‘To Count Uvarov from Grand Prince Sergei Aleksandrovich.’”

[103] Susan Stewart writes that verbal genres tend to fall into categories according to their relationship to the ideological or intellectual status quo: “Proverbs and the novels of realism are seen as standing in a metonymic relationship to common sense, while riddles and nonsense literature are seen as standing in a paradoxical and metaphorical relation to common sense” (*Nonsense* ix). On a Russian brand of nonsense, the so-called abstract or absurd *anekdot*, see Chapter Four of this dissertation.

response frequently seizes upon not only the overstated self-importance and other discursive excesses of political myth, but also upon the neglected signifieds, the body of common knowledge that the myth must actively ignore in order to sustain itself. That response can be both discursive (verbal engagement with the myth) and behavioral (demonstrative evidence of the inaccuracy of the model of reality contained in the myth).[104] Oral satire typically exposes political myths as incomplete or inadequate information, and offers a facetious, yet plausible alternative chain of causation (ironically fulfilling the function attributed to humor by proponents of "incongruity-resolved" theories).[105] Satirical engagement of myth symbolically subverts the mythmakers' aspirations to comprehensive discursive authority, which in the Soviet case was substantially derived from the purported grass-roots nature of revolutionary events. The *anekdot* credits other "organic" values and forces with inspiring the masses to change their destiny:

> Станция Лиски вызывает Москву.
> —У аппарата предреввоенсовета Троцкий.
> —У аппарата предсовнаркома Ленин.
> —Владимир Ильич, срочно пришлите на станцию Лиски две цистерны со спиртом.
> —Зачем, Лев Давидович?
> —Мужики протрезвели. Спрашивают, зачем царя скинули. (Tkhorov 6)[106]

[104] I discuss "behavioral refutation" of prevailing models in Chapter Five. Note also the Nekrasov quotation in the epigraph to Chapter One.

[105] Douglas implies that such a maneuver is essential to the joke genre. She describes her "formula for identifying jokes": "A joke is a play upon form. It brings into relation disparate elements in such a way that one accepted pattern is challenged by the appearance of another which in some way was hidden in the first" (296).

[106] "Liski Station calls Moscow: 'Chaiman of the Revolutionary Military Committee Trotskii calling.' 'This is Chairman of the Soviet People's Committee Lenin.' 'Vladimir Il'ich, immediately dispatch two tankers of grain alcohol to Liski Station.' 'What for, Lev Davidovich?' 'The peasants have sobered up. They want to know why the tsar was deposed.'"

Folk humor also has a variety of ways of toggling between collective and individual patterns of thinking, thereby destabilizing the key neo-mythological premise of the leader's (or the leader's words') status as an agent for collective volition:

> Однажды чукча вернулся из Москвы и рассказывает: "Однако, Москву видел, лозунг 'Все во имя человека, все для блага человека' видел, и 'человека' этого видел."[107]

The Chukchi's conflation of "Man" and "a man" (specifically, the current leader) hints not only at the corrupting nature of power, but also at a symptom of attempts to alter contemporaneity according to neo-mythological paradigms: when a living person (or select group) is equated with an abstract collective, the actual members of that collective become irrelevant.[108] This observation may repeat an anti-totalitarianist truism, but it also reveals an important function of the *anekdot*: engagement with the paradoxes inherent in hegemonic discourse, and exposure of that discourse as retrograde, even archaic. At the same time, the *anekdot*'s own generic and perspectival contemporaneity is contrastively displayed.

The folkloric fool in the above Chukchi joke (characteristically, he is an outsider) fulfills his traditional role of articulating a truth in the form of a misapprehension. That role in the *anekdot* can be performed by any number of characters, not excluding the leader's immediate family:

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[107] "A Chukchi comes home after a trip to Moscow and says, 'I saw Moscow, I saw the slogan "All In The Name Of Man, All For The Good Of Man," and I even got to see that Man.'" See Chapter Five for an extended analysis of the Chukchi cycle.

[108] An *anekdot* from the Putin era has a premise very similar to that of the Soviet Chukchi joke I cite here: "Программа Путина по проведению реформ: 1. Сделать людей богатыми и счастливыми. Приложение 1. Список людей прилагается" (http://www.anekdot.ru/an/an0006/000627.html#1)" ["Putin's reform program: 1. Make people rich and happy. Appendix 1: list of aforementioned people"].

> Мать Брежнева приехала к сыну в гости, посмотрела, как он живет, и расплакалась: “А вдруг снова придут красные?”[109]

As representatives of alien contexts (one geographical, the other temporal), the Chukchi and Mrs. Brezhnev are carriers of perceptions that both conflict with contemporaneity and expose contemporaneity’s own internal conflicts. The two *anekdoty* illustrate the genre’s capacity simultaneously to portray a “verbal communication disturbance” on the level of plot, and itself to effect such a disturbance by exposing internal contradictions in the prevailing discourse of the society (Attardo and Chabanne 170). Such contradictions are a product not only of aggressive neo-mythologization, but of accelerated social change in general.

3.3. NOVELTIES

The meta-mythological utility of the *anekdot* emerged after another, related function: as a means for commenting on the profound and ubiquitous novelty of urban life. In his 1922 article about the nature of the comic, in particular the (still very young) Soviet *anekdot*, Shklovskii writes that the genre’s attention to new linguistic and other social formations was more central to its comic essence than its utility as political satire: “The abundance of Soviet *anekdoty* in Russia is explained not by a particularly hostile relationship to the powers-that-be [*k vlasti*], but by the fact that new phenomena and contradictions in everyday life are perceived as comic” (63).

One of the “new phenomena” that affected perceptions of “everyday life” was the multicultural atmosphere of the Russian city. The influx into Moscow and St. Petersburg of “foreigners” from within the Russian empire—Jews, Gypsies, and people from the Caucasus—was a particularly strong influence on the cultural forms extant in cities. The presence of these

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[109] “Brezhnev’s mother comes to visit her son. When she sees how he lives, she bursts into tears and says, ‘What if the Reds come back?’”

new participants in the culture appealed to the "appetite for [the] exotic" that was part of the new, urban patterns of consumption (Stites 9). Their presence also affected the linguistic atmosphere, which had long been a source of material for the *anekdot*:

> Немец лесничий провожает своего гостя и говорит ему:
> —И что же это Василь Васильевич, как ви недолга у меня били: не успели еще здохнуть и уже уезжаете! (Karachevtsev, *"Dlia nekuriashchikh"* 20)[110]
>
> —Атгадай барышня загадкам. Что такое большой комната: на середине большой стол, на столэ много бутылок, а под столом много ног торчат, а все меэстэ—пять ы?
> —?
> —Ну как ты нэ знаешь, совсим просто: "ымынынныкы". (Karachevtsev, *"Dlia nekuriashchikh"* 93)[111]

Shklovskii writes that such conflicts between two differing versions of the same language (dialects) are a more common and reliable source of humor than a conflict between two languages (60). The new political sub-language introduced by the Bolsheviks was itself akin to an "alien dialect," and oral humor satirized it in ways similar to its treatment of the speech of non-Russians. Describing a later period, Mikhail Krongauz characterizes with particular succinctness the dichotomous nature of the Soviet-era linguistic landscape as a "diglossia" in which two parallel idioms—"Russian" and "Soviet Russian"—coexisted and served distinct communicative functions ("Bessilie" 236).

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[110] "A German is seeing off a guest. He says to him, 'Vasil' Vasil'evich, why did you stay for such a short time? You barely had time to *zdokhnut'* and now you're leaving!'" The German has confused the Russian *otdokhnut'*, "relax," or *vzdokhnut'*, "inhale," with *sdokhnut'*, "croak" (as in "die").

[111] This untranslatable *anekdot* depicts an Armenian man posing a riddle to a Russian woman: "What is this: big room, big table in the middle, lots of bottles on the table, lots of legs sticking out from under it, and the whole thing together is five *y*'s [i.e., *ы*, a Russian vowel]?" His answer is the Russian word for "birthday [party]," "imeninniki" quintuply mispronounced with a stereotypical Armenian accent.

Linguistic novelty—as the stories of Zoshchenko from the 1920s illustrate[112]—was certainly a major impetus for early-Soviet popular humor; the *anekdot* provided an ironic, running commentary on the new, often opaque verbal environment, and satirized the state's enthusiastic revisions of the language:

> Вскоре после смерти Ленина в Госиздате был выпущен популярный очерк астрономии. Просмотрев книжку, Крупская, занимавшаяся в Главполитпросвете цензурой литературы по общественно-политическим вопросам, написала письмо в Госиздат: "Товарищи, ставлю вам на вид недопустимое политическое головотяпство. Предлагаю немедленно изъять эту книгу и выпустить ее в исправленном виде и в соответствии с решением Совнаркома поменять в ней название 'Юпитер' на 'Ю-Ленин'". (Iangirov 165)[113]

The acronym was an especially prolific new form. There is a whole sub-genre devoted to it: the *rasshifrovka* ["decoded acronym"],[114] which is well represented in an anthology of early post-revolutionary *anekdoty* published in Munich in 1951 by one E. Andreevich:

> ВКП(б) – Воры, Казнокрады, Проститутки ("б" в скобках поясняет последнее иностранное слово). (15)[115]

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[112] Zoshchenko's stories were sometimes excoriated in the press for being too "anecdotal" (Shaitanov 18).

[113] "Soon after the death of Lenin, the State Publishing House issues a popular guide to astronomy. Krupskaia [Lenin's widow], who holds the post of literary censor regarding socio-political questions, reads the book and writes a letter to the publishers: 'Comrades, I draw your attention to an inadmissible political blunder. I suggest that you immediately recall this book and issue a corrected edition in accordance with the decision by the People's Commissariat to change the name of Jupiter to JuLenin.'" "Piter" is a nickname for St. Petersburg, which was, of course, renamed Leningrad after Lenin's death. In English translation this joke has an ethnic connotation ("JuLenin" sounds like "JewLenin") that is not present in the original.

[114] On this subgenre, see Kupina (100-102).

[115] "VKP(b) [*Vsesoiuznaia Kommunisticheskaia Partiia* (*bol'shevikov*)] [All-Union Communist Party (of Bolsheviks)] – Vory [Thieves], Kaznokrady [Embezzlers], Prostitutki [Prostitutes] (the 'b' in parentheses clarifies the third, foreign word [implying *bliad'*, 'whore'])."

"Замкомпоморде" – Заместитель Комиссара по Морским Делам. (27)[116]

УССР – У-у-у, Сукины Сыны, Разбойники! (9)[117]

The politicization of everyday words and everyday acts was also a common motif, especially in *anekdoty* that rely on political puns:

> —Солнышко село!
> —Ну, это уже слишком! (Abdullaeva, "Ob anekdote" 83)[118]

The state's aggressive manipulation of symbols, which shows an appreciation for the mythological power of naming, was represented in *anekdoty* as a compensatory impulse for the insatiability of the state's desire to control every aspect of the physical environment. Here are two early Soviet *anekdoty* that acknowledge both the state's "elemental" aspirations and its use of signifying systems to compensate for an inadequate reality:

> В Москве говорили, что совнарком приказал, в виду отсутствия топлива, перевести градусник на четыре градуса вверх. (Shklovskii 62)[119]

> Делая доклад об индустриализации, Калинин увлеченно описывает слушателям новые двадцатиэтажные небоскребы, недавно возведенные на улице имени Карла Маркса в Харькове. Вдруг его перебивает один из слушателей:
> —Товарищ Калинин, я из Харькова. Я почти каждый день гуляю по этой улице, но не видел там никаких небоскребов!
> —Эх, товарищ, — отвечает ему всесоюзный староста, —вместо того, чтобы шляться без дела по улицам, вы бы лучше регулярно читали газеты и из них узнавали о том, что делается в вашем городе.... (Iangirov 172)[120]

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116 Literally, "Assistant Commissar for Naval Affairs," which in the suggested acronym, *zamkompomorde*, sounds like *zamkom po morde*, "a smack in the mug with a lock."

117 This *rasshifrovka* fills in the acronym for the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic as "Ooooh, the Sons of Bitches, the Robbers!"

118 "'The sun has set!' [pun on the word *selo*, which is indeed the past-tense form of "to set," but also means to go to prison] 'Now, that's just too much!'"

119 "Word has it in Moscow that the People's Commissar has ordered that, due to the fuel shortage, all thermometers are to be set four degrees higher."

120 "[Politburo member] Kalinin is giving a speech about industrialization and animatedly describing for

Any unfamiliar sensory stimulus, including a purely visual one, could be ironically attributed to the new status quo:

> Старуха перед верблюдом: "Ну и большевики! С лошадью-то, что сделали! Срам какой!"[121]

Oral culture also registered changes in the actual physical environment and the circadian rhythms of city life. The traditional categories of control under which rural Russians had lived were temporal—the church calendar and the seasons of the year—and folk expression was intimately bound to people's awareness of those cyclical forces. The urbanized folk found themselves in new circumstances that changed not only their physical behavior, but the ways in which they produced, performed, and consumed cultural forms. Sergei Nekliudov writes:

> In the city, human dependence on natural conditions (first and foremost the change of seasons) steadily diminishes, leading to the obsolescence of calendar- and ritual-based folklore, to the desemanticization, deritualization, and temporal displacement of holidays, to their transformation into "ceremonial" forms, [. . .] and to the decisive predominance of verbal over nonverbal forms. (3)[122]

With time the types of external conditions affecting human life (and thus reflected in cultural forms) changed to include "unnatural" phenomena such as crime and living conditions. Urbanization and ideologization, moreover, transformed Russian society into one in which spatial categories were central (living space, residency concerns, daily traversal of the distance

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his audience the new twenty-story skyscrapers recently built on Karl Marx Street in Kharkov. Suddenly one of the listeners interrupts him: 'Comrade Kalinin, I am from Kharkov. I walk down that street nearly every day, but I have not seen any skyscrapers!' 'Comrade,' replies Kalinin, 'if you read newspapers instead of loitering on the streets, you'd find out what's going on in your city….'"

[121] "An old woman is looking at a camel: 'Those Bolsheviks! Look what they did to this horse! It's shameful!'" There is a similar *anekdot* involving a donkey and a rabbit.

[122] On the *anekdot*'s capacity for satirizing state "ceremonies," see Krongauz, "Bessilie" and Chapter Three of this dissertation.

between home and work, etc.). Popular expressions of the carnival impulse, too, were determined in the city (and under conditions of censorship) by spatial considerations, rather than temporal constraints (feast days defined by the church calendar or older festivals organized according to the change of seasons).

In representations of reality as itself a fairy tale, time meant little, since carnival time was permanent (Latynina 85). So actual carnivalesque impulses were given vent in spatially-defined contexts. Sergei Averintsev criticizes Bakhtin for overstating the "freedom" inherent in traditional carnival behavior by understating the strict temporal limits on the carnival impulse: "If freedom regulates itself according to the church calendar and seeks out a place for itself within the conventional system, its status as freedom is subject to clarification" (342). The "spatial carnival" of the Soviet period is arguably closer to Averintsev's notion of freedom, but in his criticism, he misses an important point about carnival: the permission of the authorities does not diminish the carnivalesque; that permission is an intrinsic part of it. For this reason, it is perhaps not accurate to speak of "Soviet carnival" for the entire Soviet period. For stretches of Soviet history, the officially affirmed rule-suspension characteristic of carnival simply did not happen.

The rise of the totalitarian state soon introduced into collective and individual life an "unnatural element" that resembled in its random cruelty the elements at whose mercy the rural peasant had lived. One canonical *anekdot* from the 1930s in particular reflects the new atmosphere and the new "hierarchy of catastrophes":

> В глухую полночь в буржуазной квартире раздается громкий стук в дверь. Хозяйка от неожиданности впадает в истерическую панику: рассовывает

> какие-то письма и документы за обои, за обивку дивана, пытается проглотить какую-то бумажку... Вдруг из замочной скважины с лестницы раздается сиплый шепот: —Барыня! Ты нас не бойся... Мы не с обыском, мы с грабежом..... (Iangirov 166)[123]

Like the natural elements, the new controlling forces could be treacherously unpredictable:

> Сталин делает доклад. Вдруг в зале кто-то чихнул.
> —Кто чихнул? (Молчание.)
> —Первый ряд, встать. Расстрелять! (Бурные аплодисменты.)
> —Кто чихнул? (Молчание.)
> —Второй ряд, встать. Расстрелять! (Долго несмолкающие овации.)
> —Кто чихнул? (Молчание.)
> —Третий ряд, встать. Расстрелять! (Бурные овации всего зала, все встают, возгласы “Слава великому Сталину!”.)
> —Кто чихнул?
> —Я, я! Я чихнул (Рыдания.)
> —Будьте здоровы, товарищ! (Barskii and Pis'mennyi 45)[124]
>
> Трое в Гулаге рассказывают, кого за что посадили. Первый:
> —Я на пять минут опоздал на работу, и меня обвинили в саботаже. Второй:
> —А я, наоборот, пришел на пять минут раньше, и меня обвинили в

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[123] “At midnight in a bourgeois apartment there is a loud knocking at the door. The mistress of the house goes into hysterics and starts stuffing letters behind the wallpaper and under the couch upholstery, and even tries to swallow some papers... Suddenly someone on the stairway outside the door whispers through the keyhole: ‘Madame! Don’t be afraid... We’re not here to search your place, we’re just burglars....’” In other variants of this *anekdot*, the resident is relieved to discover that the commotion is only the result of a fire in the building.

[124] “Stalin is giving a speech. Suddenly someone in the audience sneezes. ‘Who sneezed?’ (silence). ‘First row, stand up. Firing squad!’ (thunderous applause). ‘Who sneezed?’ (silence). ‘Second row, stand up. Firing squad!’ (a long ovation). ‘Who sneezed?’ (silence). ‘Third row, stand up. Firing squad!’ (thunderous applause, the whole audience is on its feet, shouts of ‘Glory to the Great Stalin!’). ‘Who sneezed?’ ‘I did!’ (sobbing). ‘Gesundheit, comrade!’” Stalin reportedly enjoyed *anekdoty*, and even listened to émigré comedy records (Korshunov and Terekhova 27). Medvedev reports that NKVD chief Beria regularly told Stalin the latest jokes about him. Stalin in anecdotes (in the Western sense of informal accounts of the real person of Stalin) used dark humor in a kind of doubly ironic, reflexive move: I know I am a dangerous tyrant, but officially I am not, so joking about, for instance, having the transportation minister shot if trains do not run on time (in the minister’s presence, of course) is ironic vis-à-vis that official truth, while demonstrating a sense of humor affirms the leader’s positive image.

> шпионаже.
> Третий:
> —А я пришел точно вовремя, и меня обвинили в подрыве советской экономики путем приобретения часов в капиталистической стране. (http://www.mandat.ru/anek_stalin_050_060.shtml)[125]

Anekdoty specifically about arrests and purges are not as numerous as one might expect.[126] More common were jokes about Soviet life more generally. A sub-genre that is well-represented in collections of early Soviet *anekdoty* (Karachevtsev, Andreevich) is what might be called the reverse riddle, in which the answer to the question—a metaphorical noun—is announced before its relevance to the question posed is explained. Such texts indicate a search for familiar images and conceptual categories with which to characterize the new social reality:

> —Как Вы относитесь к Советской власти?
> Первый ответ:
> —Как к собственной жене—не люблю, но терплю.
> Второй ответ:
> —Как к собственной жене—немножко люблю, немножко боюсь, и страсть как хочется другой. (Andreevich 10)[127]
>
> Вопрос: Как живется под советской властью?
> Первый ответ:
> —Как в автобусе: одни сидят, а другие трясутся.

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[125] "Three gulag inmates are telling each other what they're in for. The first one says: 'I was five minutes late for work, and they charged me with sabotage.' The second says: 'For me it was just the opposite: I was five minutes early for work, and they charged me with espionage.' The third one says: 'I got to work right on time, and they charged me with harming the Soviet economy by acquiring a watch in a capitalist country.'"

[126] Thurston's article argues this point throughout.

[127] "'What do you think of Soviet power?' First response: 'It's like my wife—I don't love her, but I tolerate her.' Second response: 'It's like my wife – I kind of love her, I'm kind of afraid of her, and I desperately want a different one.'"

Второй ответ:
—Как на океанском пароходе: необъятные горизонты, тошнит, и деваться некуда. (Andreevich 21-22)[128]

Later this type of *anekdot* would be used to express a more diachronic perspective on Soviet history:

При Ленине было как в туннеле: кругом тьма, впереди свет.
При Сталине – как в автобусе: один ведет, половина сидит, остальные трясутся.
При Хрущеве – как в цирке: один говорит, все смеются.
При Брежневе – как в кино: все ждут конца сеанса.
(http://mandat.ru/anek_bregnev_030_040.shtml)[129]

The extensive use of metaphor in official discourse, documented by Latynina, gave such texts an additional, parodic connotation, thereby enhancing their commentarial potency.

Let us return to the image of leaders. The concept of a cult of personality smacks of archaic ritual and secret wisdom handed down by a dread, anthropomorphic embodiment of a value system. The will of the leader and the unanimity of the collective trump other values in the system, especially faith in empirical knowledge:

У Сталина пропала трубка. Берия начал расследование. К вечеру арестовали сто человек, а утром уборщица трубку нашла.
Сталин звонит Берия: “Лаврентий, нашлась трубка!”

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[128] “How’s life under Soviet power?’ First response: ‘Like riding the bus: some people are sitting [in prison], the rest are shaking.’ Second response: ‘Like being on an ocean liner: vast horizons, nausea, and you can’t leave.’”

[129] “Under Lenin it was like being in a tunnel: darkness all around and light ahead. Under Stalin it was like riding the bus: one driver, half are ‘sitting,’ the rest are shaking. Under Khrushchev it was like being at the circus: one man speaks, everyone else laughs. Under Brezhnev it’s like being at the movies: everyone is waiting for the show to end.”

> —Хорошо, товарищ Сталин, но у меня уже все, за исключением одного, признались, что украли трубку.
> —За исключением одного?! Продолжай расследование. (http://www.mandat.ru/anek_stalin_010_020.shtml)[130]

It is appropriate that the Stalin cult was demystified by a figure that resembled the prosaic folk archetypes that populate tales and *anekdoty*, rather than a mythic demiurge, an epic knight, or an anointed ruler. If the image of Stalin in folklore (as opposed to fakelore) was that of a sinister, supernatural creature, and drew on traditional images of folk devils, or later, historical-*anekdot* depictions of omnipotent tsars, the *anekdot*-al Khrushchev was cast from a different die, the archetypal bumpkin:

> Хрущев сам написал свой доклад и перед выступлением показал другу:
> —Все они подхалимы и правды не скажут, даже если что не так.
> Друг прочитал и говорит:
> —Скажу тебе, Никита, со всей прямотой. Есть у тебя две ошибочки. "Засранец" пишется вместе, а "в жопу" – отдельно. (Barskii and Pis'mennyi 46)[131]

Khrushchev's simple earthiness is portrayed as comic,[132] especially in contrast to the larger-than-life, historic figures who preceded him in the Kremlin[133]:

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[130] "Stalin loses his pipe. Beriia opens an investigation. By that evening, 100 people have been arrested, but in the morning, a maid finds the pipe. Stalin calls Beriia: 'Lavrentii, the pipe's been found.' 'All right, Comrade Stalin, but everyone I arrested, except one, have confessed to stealing the pipe.' 'Except one? Continue the investigation.'"

[131] "Khrushchev writes his own speech before an appearance and shows it to a friend: 'None of those bootlickers will tell me the truth if there's something wrong with it.' His friend reads it and says: 'I'll be blunt, Nikita. You made two mistakes. "Shit-ass" should be hyphenated, and "up yours" is written as two separate words.'"

[132] Gregor Benton compares Khrushchev to another Communist leader, Deng Xiaoping, who was also an "earthy man" who himself used humor and succeeded a humorless despot (37).

[133] Vadim Rudnev writes that Khrushchev inspired many more *anekdoty* than Stalin because the former was an "intermediary" figure (*Slovar'* 28), reminiscent of the archetype of the trickster, "a mythological character who unsuccessfully imitates high-status heroes" (Timofeev 324).

Умирает Хрущев. На том свете его ведут по коридору.
На дверях таблички: Ленин ТК. Хрущев спрашивает: “Что значит ТК?”.
“Ленин - теоретик коммунизма”.
Идут дальше, надпись: “Сталин ТК”
Хрущев: “???”
“Сталин - тиран коммунизма”
Идут дальше, надпись: “Хрущев ТК”.
Хрущев: “Ну а я?”
“А ты... Ты трепло кукурузное.”[134]

Khrushchev was initially rewarded by the *vox populi* with a few specimens of that rarest of verbal forms, the sympathetic political joke:

Вопрос армянскому радио:
—Можно ли писать "сталь"?
—Можно, но лучше "Хру-сталь"![135]

Перед докладом о культе личности Хрущев бегал в Мавзолей пощупать пульс у Сталина.[136]

На XX съезде Хрущев получил из зала записку: “Где же вы были при Сталине?” Хрущев спросил: “Кто это написал?” Никто не ответил. Он сказал: “Вот и я был там же”.[137]

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[134] “Khrushchev dies. He is being escorted along a corridor in the afterworld. There is a sign on one of the doors that reads ‘Lenin TC.’ ‘What does TC mean,’ he asks. ‘Lenin, Theorist of Communism.’ Another door reads ‘Stalin TC.’ ‘And that one?’ ‘Stalin, Tyrant of Communism.’ Finally they reach a door that reads ‘Khrushchev TC.’ ‘And what am I?’ ‘You’re Khrushchev, The Corn-babbler.’” Khrushchev’s door reads *treplo kukuruznoe*, a reference to Khrushchev’s legendary obsession—inspired by a trip to the US, where he was impressed by Iowa cornfields—with introducing corn to Soviet agriculture.

[135] “A question to Radio Armenia: ‘Is it possible to write “stal'” [steel]?’ ‘Yes, but “khru-stal'” is better.’” [A play on Stalin and Khrushchev’s names]. On the Radio Armenia cycle, a mass-media-age successor to a much older tradition of Armenian riddles, see Kalbouss, Hellberg-Hirn, and Shmeleva, “Anekdoty ob armianskom radio.”

[136] “Before his speech denouncing the cult of personality, Khrushchev ran into the Mausoleum to check Stalin for a pulse.”

[137] “At the Twentieth Party Congress, Khrushchev is handed a written question from the audience: ‘Where were you when Stalin was in power?’ Khrushchev asks, ‘Who wrote this?’ Nobody answers.

> После провала снятия Хрущева “антипартийной группой” Каганович ему позвонил:
> —Товарищ Хрущев, я прошу меня не расстреливать.
> —Товарищ Каганович, твои слова показывают, какими средствами действовали бы вы, если бы победили. Мы не будем действовать этими средствами.[138]

The *anekdot* was the precise tool for the exposure of the basic incongruity inherent in the manifest ideology because the *anekdot* thrives on incongruity, paradox, and jolting eclecticism, while myth relies on unity, unanimity, and consistency of vision and register. The clash between the ludic and lofty modes of cultural expression would dominate the *anekdot*'s evolution for decades. Khrushchev briefly tapped into the discursive stream ruled by the former mode (ritualistic, purgative laughter), but when it became clear he was a servant of the latter, neo-mythological mode, whatever folk credibility he had earned disappeared.

> Армянское радио спрашивают:
> —Как называется прическа Хрущева?
> —Урожай 1963 года. (*Anekdoty nashikh chitatelei* 1: 29)[139]
>
> Хрущев прибыл на выставку в Манеже, сопровождаемый искусствоведами в штатском.
> —Это что за абстракционизм?! Лежит голая баба. Валька какая-то.
> —Это картина Фалька.
> —А это что за жопа с ушами?
> —Это зеркало, Никита Сергеевич.
> (http://www.mandat.ru/anek_hrushev_010_020.shtml)[140]

‘That’s where I was, too,’ he says.”

[138] “After the unsuccessful coup against Khrushchev by the ‘anti-Party group,’ Kaganovich calls him: ‘Comrade Khrushchev, please don’t have me shot.’ ‘Comrade Kaganovich, your words show what kind of measures you would have taken if you had won. We are not going to take such measures.’”

[139] “A question to Radio Armenia: ‘What is Khrushchev’s hairstyle called?’ ‘Harvest of 1963.’”

[140] “Khrushchev arrives at the Manezh exhibit, accompanied by undercover KGB agents posing as art scholars. ‘What sort of abstractionism is this?! It’s a naked broad lying there like some kind of lazy hussy.’ ‘That’s a painting by Falk.’ ‘And what is that, the ass with ears?’ ‘That’s a mirror, Nikita Sergeevich.’”

The Soviet personality cult was resurrected under Brezhnev, whom the *anekdot* could portray as Stalin in disguise:

> —Пошутили и хватит! — сказал Брежнев, переклеивая брови под нос. (http://mandat.ru/anek_bregnev_001_010.shtml)[141]

Or as an aspiring Lenin:

> Товарищ Брежнев, вы стали генсеком. Как вас теперь называть?
> —Можете просто: Ильич.[142]
>
> Брежнев говорит:
> —Я хотел бы после смерти лежать в Мавзолее. Подработайте этот вопрос.
> На следующий день в слове “Ленин” над буквой “е” появились две точки. (http://www.mandat.ru/anek_bregnev_001_010.shtml)[143]

Again, a key reason for the efficacy of folk humor for commentary on political myth (especially about leaders) is the fact that both types of discourse are ultimately rooted in a common tradition: oral culture. Folk humor is, moreover, a part of the cultural realm that myth must leave unsaid: call it the profane, the carnivalesque, the physiological, the “low.” Political *anekdoty*, then, are in a sense, meta-folkloric. Iurii Borev calls them “anti-myths” (“Intelligentskii fol'klor” 3), although they might also be characterized as ironic, corrective myths, like the folk explanation for the Russian Revolution cited above (“the peasants have sobered up...”). That *anekdot* tells a story of origins based on knowledge—that peasants are inclined to drink and can in fact be rather conservative (“why was the tsar deposed?”)—for

[141] “‘A joke’s a joke, but that’s enough!’ says Brezhnev, moving his eyebrows back down to his upper lip.”

[142] “‘Comrade Brezhnev, you’ve become General Secretary. How should we address you now?’ ‘You can just call me Il'ich.’” Lenin and Brezhnev had the same patronymic, Il'ich (“son of Il'ia”).

[143] “Brezhnev says, ‘After I die I would like to lie in the Mausoleum. Start working on it.’ The next day, on the Mausoleum there are two dots above the ‘e’ in ‘Lenin.’” [Adding the two dots changes the word to “Lënin,” that is, “Leonid’s”].

which state creation myths had no place. The question inherent in such texts is: if the Revolution was carried out by and for the common folk, why do the Revolution's verbal manifestations eschew essential elements of folk discourse in favor of other formations that are associated with the other end of the social and stylistic "hierarchy"?[144] The answer, which may be obvious from a sovietological perspective, in fact lies in that same realm of the ever-present, determining unsaid of political mythology. The very question, once posed, is a threat to that mythology.[145]

Soviet discourse, like other political discourse, was particularly invested in epic modes of speech. Walter Ong writes that Soviet political clichés such as "enemy of the people" or "capitalist warmongers" are "residual formulary essentials of oral thought processes," and that the phrase "Glorious Revolution of October 26" is an "epithetic formula" that effects an "obligatory stabilization, [as did] Homeric epithetic formulas 'wise Nestor' or 'clever Odysseus'" (38). The use of epic language was a constant source of parody for the *anekdot*, which itself has been characterized—from as early as 1927—as an "industrial, urban 'epic'" (Pertsov 41).[146] Shaitanov writes that the *anekdot* "is opposed, yet akin, to the epic" (20), a clue to the *anekdot*'s capacity for elaborating connections by exploiting contradictions (and vice versa). Leonid Stolovich taps into that same capacity to productively merge tradition and

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[144] The more prosaic folk genres that the state did end up embracing—the tale, the *chastushka*, the folksong, etc.—were used in such non-ironic, didactic ways that the response was similar to that of schoolchildren to the saccharine propaganda of elementary curricula. There are in fact crucial parallels between school folklore and the Soviet *anekdot*, both of which thrive(d) in "totalitarian systems." Russian scholars have done extensive work on children's humor. See, for example: Arkhipova, Belousov, "Anekdoticheskii tsikl," and Moshkin and Rudenko.

[145] Abram Terts writes something similar about literal "question-and-answer" *anekdoty*, such as the Radio Armenia cycle, which pose questions that it was forbidden to answer (81).

[146] Several observers have referred to the genre as a form of epic, including Terts (77) and Kurganov (*Anekdot kak zhanr* 56).

contemporaneity when he states that "under the totalitarian regime, the *anekdot* took on the function not only of a newspaper, but of an epic" ("Anekdot kak zerkalo" 10). Indeed, the *anekdot* corpus might be said collectively to comprise an enormous epic cycle, as that corpus is indifferent to the laws of chronological, historical time; in *anekdoty*, long-dead heroes regularly consort with the current leader or engage in similarly anachronistic behavior, in the service of drawing metaphorical or other connections.

The sub-generic division between political *anekdoty* and *anekdoty* about daily life (noted in the 1926 encyclopedia article cited in the Introduction) became increasingly blurred as that life became more and more politicized. In another encounter between tradition and contemporaneity, the politicization of the lower classes had brought into contact two traditionally separate spheres of human activity and thought: folk culture and political consciousness.[147] The (omni)presence of political and ideological formations was itself a novelty that provoked a variety of satirical responses. The hyper-politicized, abstract tone of state discourse, for example, was satirized for its neglect or ignorance of more natural categories of human existence:

> Лежат Ленин с Крупской в постели, и Ленин говорит:
> —Наденька, давай еще разочек.
> —Ты что, Володенька, нельзя. За стенкой Феликс Эдмундович спит, некрасиво.

[147] Benton points out the elite class origins of the political joke, which, he says, was not a genre of the masses because they had no contact with larger political structures, and insufficient distance from local politics to engage it satirically. The mass culture and centralization in the Soviet Union blurred differences between the national and the local, or rather inserted national political issues into local spheres of perception and discourse.

> —Ну Наденька, в прошлый раз было так хорошо, ну давай.
> —Володенька, Феликс Эдмундович услышит, нельзя.
> —Наденька, мы же тихонечко, ну пожалуйста.
> —Хорошо.
> Хором:
> —Взвейтесь кострами, синие ночи. Мы пионеры, дети рабочих...[148]
>
> Американец:
> —Вот была у нас история! Один мистер жену с любовником застал! Любовника убил!
> Француз:
> —А у нас один мсье тоже жену с любовником застал, так десять человек застрелил!
> Русский:
> —У нас у одного мужика брата казнили, так он всю страну перевернул, до сих пор разобраться не можем! (Romanov 12)[149]

A related motif was the state's tendency to politicize those "biological" categories to a ridiculous degree:

> 30-е годы. Мужик заполняет анкету. Вопрос: "Как вы спите с женой?" Что писать? Напишешь "слева" – пришьют левый уклон. "Справа" – правый уклон. "Сверху" – возвышение над массами. "Снизу" – идешь на поводу у масс. Написал: Сплю отдельно, занимаюсь онанизмом". Ему дали 10 лет: "За связь с кулаком и растрату семенного фонда".[150]

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[148] "Lenin and Krupskaia are lying in bed. Lenin says: 'Nadia, let's do it one more time.' 'No way, Volodia. Feliks Edmundovich [Dzerzhinskii] is sleeping on the other side of the wall. It wouldn't be right.' 'Come on, Nadia, it was so good last time.' 'Volodia, Feliks Edmundovich will hear us! We can't!' 'Please, Nadia, we can do it quietly.' 'Oh, alright.' They sing in unison: 'Stoke the bonfires, blue nights. We're pioneers, children of the workers…'"

[149] "An American says, 'Wow, listen to what happened in the States! A man caught his wife with her lover and killed the guy!' A Frenchman says, 'Well, in France there was also a man who caught his wife with her lover, and he shot ten people!' The Russian says, 'We had a guy who turned the whole country on its head because his brother was executed, and we still can't sort it out.'"

[150] "The 1930s. A peasant man is filling out a questionnaire, which asks: 'How do you sleep with your wife?' What to write? If he writes 'on the left,' they'll get him for leftist tendencies. 'On the right,' he'll be pegged as a rightist. 'On top,' and they'll accuse him of lording over the masses. 'On the bottom,' of sucking up to the masses. So he writes 'I sleep alone and masturbate,' and they give him a ten-year sentence 'for associating with a *kulak* [double entendre meaning both a well-off peasant and a fist] and

In a converse impulse, political speech was abducted from the sphere of collective, lofty myth into the "individualistic" and crude realm of the *anekdot*, for instance in the following joke that circulated in 1922:

> Приставили к Ленину красноармейца. Новенького. Ленин ему и говорит: вот что, брат. Разбуди меня завтра ровно в 7 часов. —Слушаюсь-с... ваше... Пришло утро. Идет Красноармеец к двери. Без 1/4 7. Как его назовешь? Шепчет: Ваше сиятельство... господин Ленин... Нет, не сиятельство... Ваше благородие.. Нет, тьфу ты. Какое благородие, когда он пролетарий. Товарищ? Нет, какой он мне товарищ! Ваше.. Батюшки! Семь часов! - Как угорелый летит красноармеец к двери, но все еще не знает, как же его назвать? Благим матом кричит: - Вставай, проклятьем заклейменный! Вставай! (Kuskova 147)[151]

While the *anekdot* flaunted its symbiosis with other texts (such as the Internationale), the compositional and stylistic logic of official verbal production demanded concealment, suppression, or preemptive denial of (through non-reference to) the possibility of alternative discourse. This is not to say that official texts ignored two-way exchange as a model of communication; indeed, dialogue between the Party (or its embodiment, the Leader) and the People was a format used in official texts of all kinds. Explications of the Party's position on a particular subject often took the form of a response to a question from the public, "proof" of an ongoing exchange of ideas between benefactor and beneficiary, teacher and learner, father and

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wasting surplus seed.'"

[151] "A young Red-Army soldier is assigned to Lenin, who tells him: 'Wake me up at 7 sharp, brother.' 'Yes, sir, your….' Morning arrives. The soldier goes to the door. Quarter to 7. How should he wake Lenin? He whispers: 'Your Eminence… Mister Lenin… No, not Eminence… Your Excellency… No, dammit. What sort of Excellency could he be, with the proletariat. Comrade? No, where do I get off calling him my comrade! Your… Cripes! It's 7 o'clock!' The soldier rushes to the door, but he still doesn't know what to call him. So he shouts at the top of his lungs: 'Arise, O curse-branded, Arise!'" I use a literal translation of the Russian version of the first line of the Internationale here, because the joke does not work otherwise. The standard English version of the line is "Arise, ye prisoners of starvation."

child.[152] The Radio Armenia cycle (canonical example: “A listener asks: ‘What is the difference between capitalism and socialism?’ Radio Armenia answers: ‘Under capitalism, man exploits man. Under socialism, it’s just the opposite’”) is the most sustained engagement of this communicative model, but the broader motif of a brief logical or verbal or behavioral duel between subject and power is ubiquitous in the *anekdot* corpus. For example:

> Телеграмма: “Москва, Кремль, Ленину. Товарищ Ленин, прошу помощь материально. Иванов”. Вызывают в КГБ:
> —Вы что, спятили? Ленин давно уже умер.
> —Вот всегда так у вас. Когда вам нужно, так вечно живой, а когда мне нужно, так давно уже мертвый. (Romanov 10)[153]

Meetings and conversations between leaders and citizens were a common trope in socialist-realist literature, film, and art. The many *anekdoty* that depict encounters between anonymous, ordinary citizens and political or military figures, as well as those in which state discourse (leader’s words, Party slogans, quotations from official texts) is contaminated via conflation with popular discourse, are, again, not only satirical commentaries on the content of state ideology, but also parodies of the state’s model of harmonious state-popular dialogue.

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[152] One of the only explicit statements of the official Soviet position on the *anekdot*, in fact, is the article-length response to a reader’s question published in *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* that I cite in the Introduction. Among the most notorious examples of an official text that uses state-popular dialogue as a device (again, in question-and-answer format) is Stalin’s 1950 pamphlet, *Concerning Marxism in Linguistics*.

[153] “A telegram: ‘To Lenin, the Kremlin, Moscow. Comrade Lenin, I request material assistance. Ivanov.’ They summon Ivanov to the KGB:

‘Have you lost your mind? Lenin died long ago.’

‘It’s always the same with you people. When you need him, he “lives eternally,” but when I need him, he “died long ago.”’”

3.4. THE OMNIVOROUS *ANEKDOT*

Anekdot analysts and commentators of all stripes (from scholars to pop journalists) are fond of using metaphors to describe the genre and its place in Soviet culture. Often such metaphors refer to the *anekdot*'s omnibus scope, its capacity to represent and/or comment on virtually any aspect or sphere of life, without exception or taboo. Alaev, for example, calls the *anekdot* a "people's encyclopedia" (12). Abram Terts refers to the genre as a "spore [. . .] containing a model of reality in its entirety" (82-83) (compare this image to Pertsov's "seed" metaphor, cited above) and also likens it to the Periodic Table and to "an endless chain [that] encompasses every existing and potential human condition on earth" (92).

In the introduction to their impressive collection *Sovetskii soiuz v zerkale politicheskogo anekdota* [The Soviet Union in the Mirror of the Political *Anekdot*], Shturman and Tiktin write that one of the genre's organizing principles is the "absence of [a single] personality, theme or situation that [is not subject] to criticism," that it is marked by an allness [*vseobshchnost'*] of skepticism and nihilism, an all-penetrating [*vsepronikaiushchee*] and all-encompassing [*vseob"emliushchee*] negation" (10). While I find the *anekdot*'s engagement of "personalities, themes, and situations" more nuanced, I appreciate the intertextuality of Shturman and Tiktin's use, three times in one short sentence, of the totalizing prefix all- [*vse*-], which is reminiscent of the ubiquitous Soviet-era adjective *vsesoiuznyi* [all-Union] (and its current heir, *vserossiiskii* [all-Russian]).

Indeed, the *anekdot*'s exhaustive reach itself represented an implicit (and more successful) rehearsal of the existential totalism to which state ideology aspired. Caroline Humphrey writes that Soviet ideology was "intended to deal with virtually every aspect of life, and enormous effort [was] devoted to seeing there [was] an ideological instruction for every

social phenomenon" (7, qtd. in Faraday 6). Aleksandr Zinov'ev refers to Communism's "eagerness to penetrate every possible nook and cranny, [. . .] to control its environment and make it identical to itself" (*Reality of Communism* 9). Note Zinov'ev's use of the phrase "control its environment," recalling the primordial link between the physical surroundings and the production of verbal culture.

Although such literal "totalitarianism" is most closely associated with the Stalin years, the state periodically and publicly reaffirmed the omni-relevance of the ideology even after Stalin's death, right up to the end of Soviet power. For example, the criterion of *ideinost'* ["idea-mindedness"]—which stipulated that all cultural texts must reflect the primary ideological views and policies of the Party—was added to the list of Socialist Realism's constituent features at the Second Congress of the Soviet Writers' Union in December 1954. The Third Party Program, adopted at the Twenty-First Party Congress in 1961,[154] is a "constructive generalization of the experience of Socialist development" that announces triumphantly that the Party has "extended its guiding influence to all spheres of social life" (123).

The universalist ambition—particularly in the absence of the gulag—ultimately subverted the ideology's credibility and authority by "despecifying" it (Cherednichenko 10). Semantically diffuse and deflated, the omnibus aspirations of ideological oversight were increasingly manifested in mechanistic, ceremonial performances that nonetheless retained the neo-mythological structuring logic elaborated at the dawn of the Soviet age.

The mechanistic nature of the ideology is often depicted in the person of the ideology's standard-bearer, Brezhnev, who frequently appears as an automaton, a mannequin, or a zombie:

> Прилетает Брежнев в Бонн. У трапа его встречает почетный караул с

[154] The Third Program was a long time coming: the First and Second Party Programs were adopted in 1903 and 1919, respectively.

оркестром. Но Леонид Ильич, ни на что не отвлекаясь, деловито подходит к клумбе, кладет в карман горсть земли, возвращается в самолет и отбывает на родину.
После этого советское министерство иностранных дел посылает в Германию следующую ноту:
"Приносим извинения за случившееся недоразумение. Вместо программы Мира в главу страны была заложена программа Лунохода".
(http://mandat.ru/anek_bregnev_030_040.shtml)[155]

Сообщение ТАСС: "Сегодня было совершено покушение на генерального секретаря ЦК КПСС, Председателя Президиума Верховного Совета СССР Леонида Ильича Брежнева. Пуля попала ему в лоб и рикошетом убила шофера. Леонид Ильич не пострадал".
(http://mandat.ru/anek_bregnev_010_020.shtml)[156]

Брежнев, выступая по радио, говорит:
—Мне недавно сообщили (пауза), будто бы все считают (пауза) будто вместо меня в машине ездит чучело...... Так вот я официально заявляю (пауза) что вместо чучела в машине езжу я.
(http://mandat.ru/anek_bregnev_020_030.shtml)[157]

Брежнев умер, но тело его живет.[158]

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[155] "Brezhnev arrives in Bonn. His plane is met by an honor guard with an orchestra. But Leonid Il'ich does not notice any of it and walks purposefully towards a flower bed, puts a clump of soil in his pocket, gets right back on the plane, and heads back to the motherland. Afterwards, the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs sends the following note to Germany: 'We apologize for the misunderstanding. Instead of loading the Peace program into the head of the leader, we mistakenly loaded the Lunar Module program.'"

[156] "TASS reports: 'Today there was an assassination attempt on the General Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee and Chair of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, Leonid Il'ich Brezhnev. The bullet struck him in the forehead, ricocheted, and killed the driver. Leonid Il'ich was not injured.'"

[157] "Brezhnev is giving a speech over the radio: 'I was recently informed (pause), that everyone believes (pause) that a dummy rides in the car in my place...... I hereby officially announce (pause) that it is I who ride in place of the dummy.'"

[158] "Brezhnev is dead. But his body [*telo*] lives on." [This is a parody of the Leninist slogan, "Lenin is dead, but his cause [*delo*] lives on."]

As textual production continued to stake ideological claims in and/or take credit for every area of individual and collective behavior in the country, the connotative scope of *anekdoty* changed accordingly, reaching a point where virtually any type of *anekdot*—from leader cycles to jokes about the most mundane and superficially apolitical aspects of everyday life—implicitly engaged the obtaining models of reality in critical dialogue.

Transitional social, economic, and political periods, writes one cultural analyst, engender "new forms of cultural and literary expression that embody, in more or less thematically explicit and formally articulated ways, the social forces contending for power in the world" (Beverley 24). A discursively potent embodiment of underlying processes can also occur through the agency of existing forms, particularly if those forms resonate with the overall cultural atmosphere, i.e., with the various circumstances informing the use of symbols in the society. The *anekdot* has served as such a "resonance chamber" at different moments in Russo-Soviet history, including—as I have discussed here—the early-twentieth century, when demographic, technological, and ideological changes provoked equally striking changes in popular verbal culture. It was not until the 1960s, however, that the *anekdot*'s links with latent and manifest, textual and extratextual formations alike became so extensive that it resulted in a golden age for the genre and made it the vanguard form of popular expression. During the so-called Stagnation period—which is the focus of the following chapter—the *anekdot*'s meta-discursive engagement of prevailing myths continued, but that engagement acquired a new significance, and new forms, when the use of verbal and other kinds of symbols came to dominate the range of "ideological behavior" in the country. The phenomenological blind spots of state myth left it vulnerable to constant outflanking by the *anekdot*, with its authentically panoramic scope, especially as the battlefield of ideas shifted more and more to the purely textual realm.

4.0. CHAPTER THREE: RESONANT DISSONANCE (THE *ANEKDOT* AND STAGNATION)

> Where there is a common sense, there will be a common nonsense.
> —Susan Stewart[159]

> Место государства в жизни личности
> уменьшается до неприличности.
> Люди не хотят читать газеты.
> Им хватает слушать анекдоты.
> —Boris Slutskii, early 1960s[160]

A particular convergence of socio-cultural and political circumstances in the 1960s and 1970s abetted the *anekdot*'s steady rise to prominence and ubiquity in the quotidian speech of Soviet city-dwellers. Journalist Dmitrii Makarov reported in 1999 that in the 1970s the KGB conducted an experiment to determine the speed with which *anekdoty* circulated. They found that a joke could discursively saturate a city the size of Moscow within six to eight hours (15).[161] Makarov offers no evidence of this satisfying bit of apocrypha, but the mere existence of such legends indicates the lasting view of the *anekdot*'s import. The genre's storied heyday lasted until state

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[159] *Nonsense* 52.

[160] "The place of the state in a person's life / is shrinking to a shameful size. / People don't want to read the newspaper. / They're satisfied just by hearing *anekdoty*." (1: 282, qtd. in Stolovich, "Anekdoty kak zerkalo nashei evoliutsii" 10). In the 1970s Slutskii would again write about the *anekdot*, this time in a poem about Stalin ("Anekdoty o Staline let cherez mnogo," 3: 79).

[161] There are other such reports of targeted, strategic joke propagation by the Soviet security agencies. The Chapaev cycle, for example, by some accounts was created in the bowels of the Lubianka in the late 1960s as a means of drawing satirical attention away from Lenin as his 1970 centennial approached (see Chapter Five).

censorship ended in the 1980s, by which time the *anekdot* was well established as one of the emblematic cultural forms of the years known in retrospect as the era of Stagnation.[162] Looking back in 1990, scholar Miron Petrovskii coined a new term in declaring the unofficial culture of the recently bygone period "anekdototsentrichnaia" ["*anekdot*-centric"] (47), and wrote that the entire society had been comprised of "potential *anekdot*-tellers and listeners" (46). The genre was recognized as a leading verbal symptom of the age even (or especially) by those in the top echelons of political power. As he tried to "destagnate" both the economy and the Communist Party's credibility, Mikhail Gorbachev was warned by a deputy: "If we don't keep our promises, the people will go back to the bottle [*v stakan*] and the *anekdot*" (Alaev 20).[163] Gorbachev himself (a famous teetotaler) stated on television in 1989 that "*anekdoty* were always our salvation" (V. Bakhtin, "Anekdoty" 799).

Yet the view of the *anekdot* as merely the latest symbolic opiate for a desperate and disillusioned population, or as a salvatory recourse in the absence of other expressive outlets, is

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[162] The term "era of Stagnation" [*epokha "zastoi"*] was initially used in the 1980s in reference to the stagnant economy during the second half of Leonid Il'ich Brezhnev's 18-year rule (1964-82), plus the brief tenures of his immediate successors, Iurii Andropov (1982-83) and Konstantin Chernenko (1983-85). Cultural scholars have used the term in a different way, to delineate the period of state retrenchment between the reform-oriented Thaw (1953-64) and perestroika (1985-91) periods. In regard to the *anekdot* I examine a longer span of time, extended on both ends. The Third Party Program of 1961 is a signal document in the history of Stagnation cultural politics, as it contains a description of the Party's renewed emphasis on propagating ideology via cultural texts. The cusp of 1962-1963 is a similarly important moment in this respect, because it marks the beginning of renewed persecution of nonconformist artistic production, exemplified most famously by Khrushchev's verbal attacks on avant-garde artists at the exhibit "Thirty Years of Moscow Art" (see Johnson and Labedz 7-10). Among the creative intelligentsia in particular, this event is symbolic of the transition from the Thaw to Stagnation.

[163] The deputy's astute linkage of alcohol and *anekdoty* as phenomena of a similar order touches on an issue with which I deal in Chapters Five and Six.

overly focused on discursive negative space, and neglects the genre's immanent appeal as a form of popular expression and entertainment, as the national pastime of an informed citizenry, and thus amounts to a fundamentally incomplete insight. At its peak, the *anekdot* enjoyed the status of a carnivalesque genre-laureate in the organic hierarchy of popular discursive forms that had developed concomitantly with the state-prescribed *Ars poetica*. The "opiate" view also neglects the *anekdot*'s crucial interactions with other cultural forms. An important reason for the genre's preeminence was its capacity to outflank, mimic, debunk, deconstruct, and otherwise critically engage with other genres and texts of all stripes and at all presumed points on the spectrum from resistance to complicity (or from unofficial to official). The *anekdot* was able to so function in large part because of the number and variety of contact points between its distinctive generic features and the constituent "epochal features" that defined the cultural moment and informed textual production therein. The present chapter is a survey of those contact points and a continuation of my discussion of *anekdot* culture's nuanced apprehension of the structuring logic of other strategies of representation. Chapters Four and Five will further examine the genre's engagement with other material extant in the mass consciousness.

The putative KGB-confirmed speed with which the *anekdot* passed from person to person was matched by the genre's appearance in and mobility among other forms of expression, including prose fiction, poetry, film, and songs.[164] The genre's brevity and formal malleability enhanced this itinerant tendency. In many respects, the *anekdot* is a genre-picaro. In its

[164] The *anekdot* was featured prominently, for instance, in many well-known *samizdat* and *tamizdat* novels. Two such works—Vladimir Voinovich's *Zhizn' i neobyknovennye prikliucheniia riadovogo Ivana Chonkina* [*The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin*, 1980] and Venedikt Erofeev's *Moskva-Petushki* [*Moscow-Petushki*, 1969]—are in fact subtitled *roman-anekdot* [novel-*anekdot*]. Aleksandr Zinov'ev's satirical novels, especially his mammoth *Ziiaiushchie vysoty* [*The Yawning Heights*, 1976], are peppered with *anekdoty* told by characters.

functions and contexts it straddles a number of different generic categories, including *publitsistika* [essayistic current-affairs journalism], small oral genres such as the toast and the rumor, and the language of the variety stage. Efim Kurganov has dubbed it a *zhanr-brodiaga* ["wandering genre"]. Sounding ironically like an ideologue doing battle with a social ill, Kurganov also likens the *anekdot* to a "parasitic insect" that can only survive by feeding off larger "organisms." He goes on to say, however, that the *anekdot* in fact does not so much feed off other genres, but feeds them, "enriches and refreshes" them (*Anekdot kak zhanr* 7), thus rescuing the concept of agency for a genre often considered "merely" responsive.[165] The genre does both, of course—feeds off and feeds—in a symbiosis that suggests an integral, even privileged, connection to the underlying symbolic reservoir of Soviet culture.

Kurganov's point also implicitly supports the view of the Stagnation era as a barren cultural desert, an environment in which mass-culture texts, like a bland punch, were inconsumable unless spiked with jiggers of irony. Yet while part of the *anekdot*'s status as a touchstone genre of the Soviet imperial twilight was its tendency to infiltrate other discourses that proved susceptible to "*anekdot*-ization" in various ways, its essential appeal was not so much compensatory as commentarial; it offered the possibility of critically engaging with—and not merely dismissing—mass-culture offerings. In this respect, the *anekdot* no doubt did make the purported "desert" a more hospitable environment for the cultural consumer, otherwise relegated to the role of passive, mute recipient of texts and images.

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[165] The role to which Kurganov refers, let us recall, is a traditional one for the genre and its ancestors: literary anecdotes in the 19th century often served as "seeds" for larger genres.

4.1. CULTURE-BEARING GENRES

The history of Soviet cultural production testifies to how different genres at different historical moments come to the fore as the popular means-of-choice for expressing inchoate values, priorities, and conflicts.[166] The fact that specific genres (i.e., constellations of distinctive generic features), and not only different topics of discourse, dominate particular cultural milieux suggests that the links between a verbal culture and its available referents need not be merely, or even primarily, semantic. The elevation of a genre to widespread acceptance and consumption by a cultural collective can be the result of various factors: (1) resonance between the genre's defining attributes (formal, pragmatic, thematic) and the latent material to be manifested; (2) dissonance between the genre and other extant manifestations of that material that are judged inadequate and thus deserving of critical attention; (3) the logistical potential for texts in the genre to reach a broad base of cultural consumers (a potential that was often limited in the USSR, for example, in the case of underground lyric poetry during the Stalin period or, in a very different way, *auteur* cinema during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s); and (4) the number and variety of functions (psychological, social, aesthetic) the genre fulfills for its consumers. Another such factor, of a somewhat different nature, is the extent to which the genre is championed and propagated by the state (a factor that can work both ways, i.e., a genre can become popular precisely because it is taboo).

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[166] Terts traces the process back much further than Soviet history: "Когда-то по пятам событий слагались исторические песни и легенды. Одно время на эту потребность пытались отвечать частушки. Теперь эта миссия полностью перешла к анекдоту" (90-91) ["At one time it was the historical song and the legend that composed on the heels of current events. In a different period, the *chastushka* fulfilled that role. Now the mission has been completely assigned to the *anekdot*"].

At times the state-sanctioned generic "wall of honor" in the USSR substantially coincided with the unofficial, organic generic hierarchy, for example: nationalistic songs, literature, visual art, and even folk humor during the Great Patriotic War (WWII); lyric poetry and certain forms of youth culture at the height of the Thaw; and documentary film and *publitsistika* during perestroika. During such moments, popular sentiment and state ideological priorities shared constituent tropes. The episodes of apparent polar harmony were typically precipitated by a weakening of ideological supervision of cultural production by the Party, which had the wisdom to modify its cultural policies periodically for politically pragmatic reasons. The liberalization of cultural policy, in all three of the above-mentioned periods, was undertaken at least in part to give cultural producers (and consumers or "reproducers") creative latitude to express a newly emergent idea in the ruling ideology, with the ultimate goal of alleviating a crisis in, fortifying, and/or preserving that ideology. In the case of the Thaw, for example, the new values originating from the Party under Khrushchev were fundamentally aimed at reinvigorating the progressive socialist society after the anomalous, reactionary Stalinist period. The "new idea" was de-Stalinization, with a concomitant adjustment of aesthetic emphasis from the epic to the lyrical, from the "fathers" to the "sons" (i.e., to those who came of age after Stalin's death), and, in certain, limited respects, from the masses to the individual. Even during perestroika, reformers hoped that the relaxation of intellectual and artistic prescriptions and proscriptions by the Party would help to rejuvenate a socio-political system in crisis (Kelly and Shepherd, *Russian Cultural Studies* 12), thus preventing the People from once again resorting to "the bottle and the *anekdot*."

Genres, of course, can serve just as (or more) readily as means of expressing collective resistance to a new policy turn. The emergence of the *anekdot* as the standard-bearing popular

genre of the post-Thaw period reflects the popular disillusionment in the face of renewed, quasi-Stalinist manipulation of cultural production—as well as renewed socio-political repression, though in a mostly non-lethal form—under Brezhnev.[167] The fact that what came to the fore was a humorous, folkloric genre—a combination of mode and medium that the state had discovered to be ideologically problematic decades earlier—indicates the end of the fragile accord between Party and populace. The transition from a palpable sense of optimism and enthusiasm on the part of citizens in the wake of de-Stalinization during the late 1950s to a widespread penchant for cynicism, irony, and satire by the late 1960s (Vail' and Genis, *60e* 142-52)—as well as a palpable reining in of artistic experimentation and variety in the mass media—gave the *anekdot* increasing cachet as a form of expression and entertainment.

4.2. STAGNATION AS THE THAW OF THE *ANEKDOT*

The popular cynicism characteristic of Stagnation was in particularly stark contrast to the preceding period of enthusiasm and consensus, with its celebration of youth and especially its premium on sincerity and good humor. Petr Vail' and Aleksandr Genis use the term *vesel'e* [“joviality”] (*60e* 142) to characterize the general public mood during the Thaw, when “official slogans coincided with popular mottos” (150). The heady enthusiasm of the Thaw made adaptation to the subsequent period of reactionism all the more complex a maneuver for the Soviet cultural consumer, who had to effect an intellectual and behavioral retreat from public

[167] The Brezhnevian retrenchment was a policy shift exemplified most dramatically by the 1968 suppression of the Prague Spring, but which was nascent in cultural politics years before, the widely publicized persecution of Iosif Brodskii in 1964 and Andrei Siniavskii and Iulii Daniel' in 1965-66 being the best-known examples. There were spasms of reactionism even during the Khrushchev years, of course (the 1956 intervention in Hungary and the 1957 persecution of Pasternak, for example), but with Brezhnev’s ascent to power the conservatism became sustained and systemic.

vesel'e and sincere self-expression as the state itself retreated from reformism.[168] To put it another way, the Thaw mentality lingered (festered?), but with ever fewer discursive outlets; Lev Anninskii contrasts the "open freedom" of the Thaw to the "secret freedom" of Stagnation (*Shestidesiatniki i my* 6).[169] The latter period saw a revised understanding of the concept of "public," a widespread formation of smaller collectives, and the emergence of more hermetic chronotopes, both within cultural texts (on the level of plot) and as the favored environments for cultural consumption itself.

The Stagnation years were followed by another period that saw a significant measure of official-popular harmony: perestroika. The belief that Gorbachev's liberal policies were a continuation or a belated completion of Thaw-era reforms is one reason for the relative dearth of scholarly attention to Stagnation popular culture. That culture is considered by some to be merely the uninteresting product of an age of bitterness and falsity book-ended by two periods of optimism and sincerity, a span of congealed time in which Russo-Soviet culture was in a state of suspended animation.[170] While such generalizations are unhelpfully broad, there is a definite sense that historical time itself had been "suspended" by the mid-point of Brezhnev's tenure,

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[168] Ronald G. Webb's article "Political Uses of Humor" focuses on "the uses individuals make of jokes and joking in relation to the constant interchange involved between institutional stability and social change." He writes: "Institutional change often demands a change in the social understandings of those people who have used a particular institution to structure their relationships, and ideological change tends to alter the way in which people who share an ideological schema justify behaviors circumscribed by that ideology" (36).

[169] The notion of "secret freedom" is certainly not new in Russian thought. Recall the nineteenth-century writer Konstantin Aksakov's opinion that Russians' tolerance for authoritarian government is a result of their capacity to find a measure of "inner, communal" freedom (qtd. in Rancour-Laferriere 37-38).

[170] The lack of attention to Stagnation culture stands in particular contrast to the wealth of scholarship on Stalinist culture published over the past decade or so.

when even the official designation for the current period—the "era of developed socialism"[171]—implied with its passive participle a kind of open-ended bivouac in the relentlessly progressive march of Soviet history ("life in its revolutionary development"). Predictably, the popular image of the age was less positive; the numerous versions of the "stopped train" *anekdot* acknowledge the omnipresent stagnancy of Soviet life using a common official metaphor, a locomotive, and imagine not only Brezhnev's response, but that of his predecessors, as well:

> Наш паровоз вперед летит! Вдруг—остановка, дальше разобраны рельсы. Как поступают вожди?
> Ленин: Выйти всем на субботник и построить дорогу.
> Сталин: Первый вагон расстрелять. Второй расстрелять, если до завтра не проложит рельсы.
> Хрущев: Разобрать рельсы сзади и проложить вперед.
> Брежнев: Закрыть занавески и качать вагоны, как будто мы едем, и объявлять станции.[172]

The image of announcing a sequence of stations while on a curtained, stopped train is a shrewd metaphor for official strategies of representation that predate the Soviet period (recall

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[171] Krongauz uses the term *epokha zrelogo sotsializma* ["the era of mature socialism"], which, though encountered more rarely in official discourse than "the era of developed [*razvitogo*] socialism," he considers more descriptive of the nature of the social system as it had congealed by the Brezhnev period ("Bessilie" 234). The term also helpfully evokes the extreme "maturity" of Brezhnev himself, as well that of his epigones, Andropov and Chernenko.

[172] "Our locomotive races on! Suddenly it stops: the tracks ahead are broken. How do our leaders deal with the problem? Lenin: everyone goes out on a voluntary workday to fix the tracks. Stalin: shoot everyone in the first car, and have the second car shot if the rails aren't fixed by the next day. Khrushchev: pull up tracks behind the train and put them in front. Brezhnev: draw the curtains, shake the train as if it's moving, and keep announcing station stops." After Brezhnev, of course, subsequent leaders were added to the *anekdot*: "Горбачев: Выйти всем из вагонов и кричать: —У нас нет рельсов, нет даже шпал! Впереди пропасти!" ["Gorbachev: Everyone get out of the train and shout, 'We have no rails! We don't even have crossties! We're heading towards a cliff!"]. The version included here is a composite of texts found in Barskii (*Eto prosto smeshno* 58) and V. Bakhtin ("Anekdoty nas spasali vsegda" 809).

Potemkin villages), and which Mikhail Epstein (after Jean Baudrillard) has dubbed “simulation” (“The Origins and Meaning” 26). The Soviet use of such phantom signifiers entailed not merely affixing a signifier to an absent signified, but composing complex narrative signifiers in order to mask the myriad signs of a *de facto* temporal, historical stasis.

The popular image of Brezhnev himself commonly questioned his awareness of the passage of time; there are several *anekdoty* that begin by quoting the general secretary as he addresses the politburo following the death of one of its geriatric members: “Na pokhoronakh Suslova... kstati, gde on?” [“At Suslov’s funeral... by the way, where is he?”]. Another joke intimates just how deeply the concept of stasis was ingrained in the worldview of the political elite:

> Брежнев играет со внуком:
> —Ты кем хочешь быть, когда вырастешь?
> —Генеральным секретарем!
> —А зачем нам два генеральных секретаря? (*Anekdoty nashikh chitatelei* 4: 21)[173]

The creeping stagnation that ultimately became the label for an entire period of Soviet history, however, was not merely the result of the conservatism (or catatonia) of the geriatric Party leadership; the relative lull in life-shattering historical cataclysms after decades of war and revolution nourished the Stagnation *Zeitgeist* almost as fundamentally as did the state’s anti-progressivism and rollback of Thaw-era reforms. Temporal tropes were in flux; a general sense of historical teleology and/or eschatology was giving way to a common perception of time as cyclical, like the work week or the TV schedule (not to mention the *anekdot*). In this respect, a genre that in its cyclicity and scope resembles a latter-day, parodic form of epic seems an appropriate medium for a description of the age, considering that “epic time,” too, is static.

[173] “Brezhnev is playing with his grandson. ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ ‘General Secretary!’ ‘What do we need two General Secretaries for?’”

Anatoly Vishevsky identifies the definitive characteristics of the period as "the strengthening of the bureaucratic apparatus [another mechanism that subverted the flow of time – SG] and [. . .] a dull and eventless routine in art and everyday life" (4). Andrei Nemzer has a similar, if slightly more positive, spin on the Stagnation socio-cultural environment, which he describes as a sort of post-historical, parodic idyll marked by an atmosphere of "tender gloom [in which] it seemed that everything in this world (and especially in this country) had already passed, and you could quietly live your own life (saving up for a car, reading *samizdat*, sipping port wine, or combining these and other pleasant activities)" (3). One such "pleasant activity" was telling *anekdoty* in small gatherings in homes, at universities or the workplace (often during cigarette breaks), on trains, in food lines, etc. The popularity of joke-telling—and the snowball effect an initial joke has among a group of *anekdot* aficionados—led to the coinage of the term *travit' anekdoty*, meaning "to reel out" or "to feed out" (as in a rope) *anekdoty* (Yurchak, "Cynical Reason" 174). "Reeling out" *anekdoty* became one of the signal pastimes of urban life during Stagnation. The practice of "reeling" evokes the *anekdot*'s generic heritage as a folkloric form in a most primal sense. Oral forms such as the folktale or the folk song, as mentioned previously, were primarily "winter" or "fallow" genres,[174] means of passing time when the exterior atmosphere precluded other activities, or when there was no pressing work to be done. The Soviet-era *anekdot* also implied the presence of a hostile "exterior atmosphere," and thus preserved—in a modern, urban way—the ritualistic significance of collective oral performance.

The ways in which *anekdot*-telling is typically initiated are constitutive elements of its generic nature. The first *anekdot* is most commonly articulated in one of two communicative contexts: either a participant in a conversation makes an associative link between (1) something

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[174] I am not suggesting here that the *anekdot* was dormant in the summer; on the contrary, it was a staple of dacha life.

in his own or an interlocutor's speech and (2) an *anekdot* in his personal repertoire, or a new or *svezhii* ["fresh"] *anekdot* is explicitly offered or solicited, often during the phatic phase of the conversation.[175] The ensuing conversation then takes the form of a chain of *anekdoty*; the participants in the conversation begin to "reel out" *anekdoty* in turns (Yurchak, "Cynical Reason" 175). The exaggerated closure of each *anekdot*—the punch line—is a clear marker of the end of a particular utterance, and the expectation of one in response: laughter and another *anekdot*.

The ritual aspects of *anekdot* culture had a parodic significance. Krongauz has referred to official discursive performances as "verbal rituals" ("Bessilie" 234), a point that suggests a functional affinity between the *anekdot* and one of its "above-ground" discursive counterparts.[176] Nekliudov has pointed out, however, that a better term for the phenomenon Krongauz refers to as "ritual" would be "ceremony," since as an anthropological/folkloristic term "ritual" denotes something of genuine and profound meaning, while "ceremony" refers to the now-empty shell that occupies the discursive location of a former ritual (Nekliudov, personal communication, March 1999).[177] Moreover, ritual has a temporal element, an implication of passage from one

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[175] A distinctive, though probably rare, aspect of joke-telling in totalitarian societies was the use of a "provocation *anekdot*" by a secret informer to elicit in response incriminating statements (i.e., *anekdoty*) or actions (i.e., failure to report the *anekdot*-teller to the authorities). This practice is alluded to in *anekdoty* themselves, for example: "A conversation in the gulag: 'What are you in for?' 'Laziness. My friend and I were swapping *anekdoty* and I thought, "I'll turn him in tomorrow." But in the morning they were already coming for *me*.'" I discuss the phenomenon of meta-*anekdoty* in Chapter Four.

[176] On the topic of "Soviet ritual," see Chernyshov and Glebkin.

[177] Nekliudov's point about these two concepts is valid mainly in regard to their scholarly usage, and only in Russian (*ritual* versus *tseremoniia*). The denotational distinction between them that he points out does not inform the English concepts of "ritual" and "ceremony," at least in everyday parlance.

stage to the next, that was absent in the "atemporal" environment of the Brezhnevian USSR, which privileged "rites of stasis" over rites of passage.

The well-documented public mood of the Brezhnev period notwithstanding, the links between the *anekdot* and the Stagnation environment as a cultural chronotope are by no means limited to the genre's capacity for parody and ironic expression. The retreat of cultural consumers from the Thaw's public settings (poetry "concerts," youth festivals, cafés, etc.) to private activities (reading *samizdat*, attending intimate gatherings in apartments, and especially watching television) also contributed to the genre's florescence. In this regard, it is worth recalling that among the *anekdot*'s generic ancestors is an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century salon genre. The very nature (chronotopic circumstances) of popular cultural consumption and the range of genres consumed by the populace at a given moment are mutually influential. The insular gatherings characteristic of the Brezhnev period (like the intimate circles of urban intellectuals in Pushkin's St. Petersburg) were highly amenable to *anekdot*-telling as a social practice. The individual, "cellular" collectives of the Stagnation era together constituted a larger, more abstract popular collective whose cohesion was defined by the uniformity of its members' life experiences,[178] and also by their common exposure—and response—to mass media texts.

Although there are certainly causal links between the Soviet citizenry's disillusionment with public forms of cultural expression and that citizenry's cocooning impulse, the latter tendency was not exclusively a consequence of the former. The 1960s saw a boom in television ownership,[179] a development that also influenced the thematic emphases of the *anekdot*, which

[178] See my discussion of Briker and Vishevskii's notion of a "cultural text" in Chapter Four.

[179] On television in the late-Soviet period, see Mickiewicz and Prokhorova.

increasingly drew on (primarily visual) mass-media texts for its source material. Barskii and Pis'mennyi cite several jokes that explicitly acknowledge the role of the mass media in contemporary Soviet life:

> —Правда ли, что при коммунизме продукты можно будет заказывать по телефону?
> —Правда. Но выдавать их будут по телевизору. (47)[180]
>
> —Радио сообщает, что в стране изобилие продуктов, а наш холодильник пустой. В чем тут дело?
> —Включи холодильник в радиосеть. (47)[181]
>
> Ввели четвертую программу телевидения. В первый же день гражданин сел к телевизору, включил первую программу и увидел, что по ней выступает Брежнев. Переключил на вторую – снова Брежнев. На третью – опять Брежнев. Переключил на четвертую. Там сидит полковник КГБ и грозит пальцем: "Допереключаешься!"[182]

The extremely standardized familiarity with cultural texts stands in contrast to the more politicized "common knowledge" of previous periods of Soviet history, especially the Stalin years.[183] The citizen's position vis-à-vis the state, obviously, had changed with the end of

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[180] "'Is it true that under Communism we'll be able to order food by telephone?' 'Yes, but it will be delivered by television.'"

[181] "'They announced on the radio that there is a surplus of food in the country, but our refrigerator is empty. What gives?' 'Plug your refrigerator into your radio receiver.'"

[182] "The state adds a fourth television channel. On the day it begins broadcasting, a citizen turns on channel one and sees Brezhnev giving a speech. He switches to channel two: Brezhnev again. Brezhnev on channel three, as well. The citizen switches to channel four and sees a KGB colonel wagging his finger and saying: 'keep going, one more click!'"

[183] The Stalin era produced its own "telegraphic" *anekdoty*, which reflected that epoch's notion of common experience: "'Алло, позовите, пожалуйста, Абрамовича.' 'Его нет.' 'Он на работе?' 'Нет.' 'Он в командировке?' 'Нет.' 'Он в отпуске?' 'Нет.' 'Я вас правильно понял?' 'Да.'" (Barskii, *Eto prosto smeshno* 295) ["'Hello, may I speak to Abramovich?' 'He's not here.' 'Is he at work?' 'No.' 'Is he away on business?' 'No.' 'Is he on vacation?' 'No.' 'Do I understand you correctly?' 'Yes'"]. I have heard this joke characterized both as a product of the Stalin era and of the late

Stalinism, and continued to evolve. K.N. Rogov writes, "The relationship to the political regime, to social 'reality,' became an existentialist problem" ("O proekte" 9)—that is, a question not merely of one's own physical safety or professional security, but a philosophical and moral issue—specifically in the aftermath of 1968. Rogov attributes the fundamental condition of the collective consciousness during Stagnation to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, but he writes that the Soviet citizen's experience of the events in Prague was *textual*; the "text" "Tanki idut po Prage" ["Tanks roll through Prague"] "became a direct cause of that complete break with 'reality,' that distinctive 'revolution of pessimism,' that in large measure defined the intellectual axis of the entire era" (9).

The dissident movement that began in earnest following the 1968 invasion relied substantially on unofficial textual responses: letters, petitions, periodicals, novels, etc. A major indicator of the wider popular discursive relationship with the state, however, is the *anekdot*. Official state discourse acquired new semantic and pragmatic associations in the relatively "vegetarian" atmosphere of post-Stalinist Soviet society, which was in contrast to the "cannibalistic" excesses of the 1930s and the late 1940s-early 1950s.[184] Official statements of ideological goals and principles were no longer routinely accompanied by institutionalized violence (i.e., gulag sentences and executions) but, rather, remained largely in the linguistic,

1970s, the period of third-wave (primarily Jewish) emigration.

[184] One scholar of the *anekdot* characterizes the difference between the two periods in familiar metaphors: "If (under Stalin) the country resembled something between a military barracks and a gigantic concentration camp, now it looked like an equally enormous insane asylum, the residents of which recognized more and more the absurdity of their own existence.... Fear had given way to laughter" (K. Sedov 10-11).

symbolic realm.[185] The state no longer aggressively mutilated social reality to conform to the official model. The notorious persecutions of Pasternak, Brodskii, Siniavskii and Daniel', Solzhenitsyn, et al. notwithstanding, the Party's struggle after Stalin to harness the intelligentsia in the service of ideology was waged largely via ideological institutions (the culture industry, schools, mass media, etc.) rather than repressive organs (police and military).[186] More accurately, the sphere of activities of what once were strictly political (and lethal) organs (the KGB and the Central Committee, for example) was expanded to include the monitoring of cultural production for "ideological deviations" (K.B. Sokolov 229).[187] This is another development traceable, at least in part, to the 1961 Party Program.

The popular response to state policies and behaviors likewise remained largely in the realm of the symbolic. The official idiom, which Krongauz labels "Soviet Russian" ("Bessilie" 236), was a form of discourse whose informative and ludic functions had been superseded by various ritualistic (or, Nekliudov would say, ceremonial) functions. Those functions included testing the loyalty of the members of the society (level of participation or non-participation in the ceremony) and "maintaining the illusion of public life or, more precisely, imitating it" (Krongauz, "Bessilie" 235). Such "dead" language (also called *langue du bois*, newspeak, etc.), is simultaneously enslaved to and severed from its referents, and thus other, non-semantic functions—pragmatics, for instance—are vulnerable to satirical reinterpretation of precisely the

[185] I do not mean to dismiss the arrests, exiles, forced hospitalizations, and other types of political persecution that took place in the 1960s—1980s; only to draw a contrast with the pre-1953 environment.
[186] Recall Louis Althusser's distinction between "ideological state apparatuses" and the "repressive state apparatus" (144).
[187] Again (see the end of Chapter Two), the Party's renewed, publicly announced interest in the ideological content of cultural texts can actually be dated to the beginning of the 1960s, specifically to the Third Party Program of 1961.

sort favored by the *anekdot*. If popular and official speech were the two incompatible idioms in a diglossic society, the *anekdot*'s affinity for irony—a mode of discourse *defined* by an encounter between two incompatible idioms—made it an ideal medium for speaking about that diglossia.

The values the *anekdot* (explicitly and implicitly) expressed did not coincide, and indeed often directly conflicted, with the values informing Soviet dissident literature and art. Dissident pathos was frequently manifested in prosaic, explicit, testimonial accounts of the effects of totalitarianism on the individual psyche and body. What little irony there is to be found in such accounts is tendentious and directed at the regime and its servants. Dissident classics are personal in tone (first-person or quasi-direct narrators being the norm). The *anekdot* implicitly parodied pathos and self-righteousness, occupying a discursive position outside both the official ideology and the morally indignant opposition. The writings of Solzhenitsyn, et al. sought to bear witness, to record and propagate the damning evidence of the official ideology's criminal illegitimacy. But the iconoclasm of such inscribed anti-Soviet sentiments was rarely effected on the level of textual form, and such artists did not eschew the uncritical use of models of discourse that the official ideology itself championed as the most appropriate for the expression of essential truths.

If dissident culture represented a strategic opposition to the institutionalized ideology, the *anekdot* was an instrument for tactical engagement with specific performances of that ideology. *Anekdoty* were self-propagating, instant, satirical gestures, markers of a larger, more abstract reservoir of irony at the core of popular sentiment.[188] The *anekdot* was the chief medium by which the public-at-large (not professional authors) participated in the overall "irony pageant."

[188] On the general atmosphere of irony during Stagnation, see Vishevsky.

Zara Abdullaeva's reference to the *anekdot* as "the avant-garde of mass culture" is helpful; the genre anticipated and scooped mass-media discourse on every front (Abdullaeva, "Popular Culture" 212). Such tactical engagement meant multifaceted engagement, contact between the two idioms on multiple levels.

4.3. DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

Mikhail Bakhtin writes that carnival "belongs to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play" (*Rabelais* 7). The *anekdot* itself, as a genre, is a "pattern of play" that can be isolated generically by identifying its distinctive characteristics. For my purposes, I will widen the definition of "genre" to include features that are not exclusively related to the immanent form of the *anekdot* as a verbal text, but which nevertheless are essential markers of the genre's specificity in the Soviet period.

In Chapter Two I examine the strategically broad and eclectic referential scope of the genre as a feature that allowed it to outflank totalitarian aspirations to discursive omnipresence. Here I want to touch on features and devices of a more formal (i.e., stylistic) nature. Several attributes of the *anekdot* found particular resonance (or equally productive dissonance) with more-or-less abstract qualities of the Stagnation cultural environment itself. Those attributes include orality, the punch line, brevity, third-person narration, present tense, and performativity. In Chapters Four and Five I turn to a defining feature of the *anekdot* that is a bit more difficult to place on the venerable form-content continuum: reflexivity.

The rise of an oral genre like the *anekdot* as a medium for nonconformism, in an environment in which inscribing such resistance was dangerous (although no longer a certain health risk), is hardly surprising. Whereas folklore in its most traditional sense is viewed as a

phenomenon of a pre-literate stage, i.e., a corpus of texts that predate the onset of a literary heritage, the urban *anekdot* in the USSR partially *supplanted* a literary tradition. The creators and caretakers of that tradition by necessity turned to an oral medium. Borev writes: "the intelligentsia had always gotten by transmitting its experience in written form, and never had to resort to a folk form like oral literature." After it did "resort" to such forms, the educated stratum assimilated other oral forms, as well, such as rumors, urban legends, and anecdotes in the broader meaning of personal, oral testimonies of events and personalities ("Intelligentskii fol'klor" 3). Zhanna Dolgopolova discusses the *anekdot* as the oral counterpart to another form of unofficial culture: *samizdat* literature. Dolgopolova does not concur with Borev that the *anekdot* was an exclusively intellectual genre; whereas *samizdat* was largely associated with the intelligentsia, she writes, the *anekdot* "operate[d] at all cultural levels" ("The Contrary World" 1).

The genre is among the shortest oral forms. Abdullaeva compares the *anekdot* to a "koan," giving its signature brevity a ritualistic, even mystical significance ("Vse my vyshli" 116). The succinctness of the genre also had a practical value: it made it portable, and thus safer than other forms, in an environment of censorship, for expressing certain things. The length of the genre is itself the subject of a series of jokes prefaced as "the shortest *anekdot*": "Kolobok povesilsia" ["Kolobok hanged himself"][189]; "Negr zagoraet" ["A Black man is sunbathing"]; "Evrei-dvornik" ["A Jewish janitor"]; "Rodil" ["He gave birth"]; "Odnazhdy vstretilis' utrom v trolleibuse dva chlena politbiuro..." ["One morning two members of the politburo meet on the

[189] Kolobok is the Russian analogue to the nursery-rhyme Gingerbread Man. Kolobok consists only of a head, however, which is the premise of this *anekdot*.

bus...”], etc. All of these examples distill the text to an essential comic core; the fact that in each case the effect is reliant on a paradoxical image or concept lends credence to incongruity theories of humor.

The *anekdot*’s allusive power relies not on an external ideology that states that all artistic images are stand-ins for the constituent parts of an ideal reality, but on the common knowledge shared by *anekdot* consumers. Soviet citizens’ common experiences, again thanks to aggressive standardization in education and the mass media, were more “common” than usual, which made the shorthand style of the *anekdot* very potent. The enormous print runs of popular books, the high cinema attendance rate, and the ubiquity of televisions made knowledge of cultural codes during Stagnation very standardized indeed, which allowed for concentrated, concise *anekdoty* to carry a high semantic load. The signifying power of terse utterances was acknowledged in *anekdoty* themselves:

> Идут два писателя, мимо проезжает “черный ворон”. Один вздыхает.
> —Я с тобой совершенно согласен, — говорит второй. (Sokolova, “Iz starykh tetradei” 348)[190]

> На оживленном перекрестке человек раздает листовки. Прохожие опасливо берут, быстро суют в карманы, отойдя подальше, достают, чтобы прочесть, и... с возмущением возвращаются назад:
> —Тут же ничего не написано, пустые листовки раздаешь!
> —А чего писать? И так все ясно. (Barskii and Pis'mennyi 47)[191]

The brevity of the *anekdot* is responsible as well for the overall atomism of the genre, the piecemeal way in which it engages social life and political culture. This characteristic of the

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[190] “Two writers are walking down the street when a ‘black Maria’ passes by. One sighs. ‘I agree completely,’ says the other.”

[191] “A man is handing out leaflets at a busy pedestrian intersection. Passersby cautiously take them, quickly stuff them in their pockets, and pull them out to read them only when they’ve covered a bit of distance. Having done so, they come back, incensed: ‘There’s nothing written on these! You’re handing out blank leaflets!’ ‘What’s there to write? It’s all perfectly clear anyway.’”

joke allowed it to refute official culture's sweeping generalities, privileging of "high" culture (at the expense of low/street/popular culture), and soft-focus perspective on social reality. The *anekdot* is a disassembled epic, stored in the minds of its millions of performers and consumers, just as Anna Akhmatova's "Requiem" was preserved orally during the Stalin years by a group of her close friends, each of whom memorized a small section of the long poem.

The fact that a joke tends to be "mono-episodic" is also significant: the joke is a synchronic slice of time, a hermetically whole chronotope, containing no suggestion how the moment fits in the diachronic sweep of history. The *anekdot* rejects both origins and destinations/destinies in its implicit disregard for teleology. It defies us to explain how that moment is related to the glorious past or the radiant future. In fact, it constantly blurs time by placing figures from the past in contemporary settings, or vice versa.

In another sense, though, *anekdoty* are impeccably teleological; the punch line is one of the most stable, reliable features of the genre. David Navon describes the punch line as a "violation of expectations" and writes that it is "probably crucial" to the joke genre that that violation "can be blamed on the absence, disuse or misuse of knowledge" (211). In this sense, the punch line represents an implicit travesty of Marxist teleology; a punch line is a crescendo based not on progression through stages, but on a sudden derailing of predictable forward progress. It is a retrograde, entropic subversion of the evolution from spontaneity to consciousness. Even on an apolitical level, the punch line jibes with Russian-language discourse; the important information in a Russian sentence typically comes at the end.

The *anekdot* is predominantly a third-person form of discourse. Pathos-based unofficial discourse was typically narrated in the first-person singular or by a quasi-direct narrator,

indicating its partial reliance on notions of martyrdom, testimony, and kenoticism.[192] Official rhetoric favored the first-person plural (we the Party, we the socialist brotherhood, etc.) or second person ("Workers of the world...," etc.): *we* are all in this together as a collective, but *you*, the People, need the guidance of *us*, the Party.

The *anekdot* is also a largely present-tense genre, its grammatical temporality perhaps amplifying its topical contemporaneity. The entire past lay open for interpretation through the prism of the most recent authoritative version of history. The future was clear (and bright). The present, however, was more problematic and difficult to engineer and to represent. The Party's curious, paradoxical 1932 exhortation to "depict life in its revolutionary development" seems to demand a simultaneously synchronic ("depict life in") and diachronic ("development") approach to narrative. As Katerina Clark writes, the synchronic texts of official culture (specifically, socialist-realist novels) were engineered to represent metaphorically the diachrony of Soviet history (9). The *anekdot* seems to capture that paradoxical temporality: it describes an occurrence that never happened, and never will happen, but could feasibly happen at any moment. It is typically told in the present tense for a simpler reason, as well: it is a form of drama, in which the sole performer—the *anekdot*-teller—recites both the dialogue and the "stage directions," which, in Russian as in other languages, are rendered in the present tense.

Although folklorists have traditionally categorized the *anekdot* as a variety of oral prose (more specifically, as one of the genres of *neskazochnaia proza* ["non-folktale-prose"]), it is clearly a dramatic genre. Shmeleva and Shmelev insightfully characterize it as a "production for a single actor" (*Russkii anekdot* 24). James von Geldern and Richard Stites call *anekdoty* "the script in the private theater of friends in small groups " (118-19). The genre's fundamental

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[192] John Beverley mentions Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* as a Russian example of the Latin-American genre known as *testimonio* (36).

dramatic nature is closely related to its orality. Smolitskaia examines as the key distinctive feature of the Soviet *anekdot* its *performativnost'* ["performativity"], that is, its status as an oral genre whose discursive habitat is defined by a single teller and one or more listeners, who, in turn, themselves may take on the role of teller ("Performans"). She further refines her definition by noting the *anekdot*'s status as the only exclusively oral genre of the Soviet period (by contrast, the performance of songs and *chastushki* was directly informed by written texts). Furthermore, the *anekdot* is a free-floating genre, as opposed to, say, toasts (tied to table culture) and certain wedding songs. It is encountered in a wide variety of everyday situations and locations. A joke-telling session can serve as a bonding mechanism for a group of people (on a train, at the beach, etc.) or to reinforce existing bonds, based on "common values" articulated in *anekdoty*, within an established collective (Smolitskaia, "Performans").

The purely communicative nature of the mask adopted by the *anekdot*-teller (speech + gestures + facial expressions) has associative links to two characteristic features of Stagnation-era popular culture and discourse. The first is the prevalence of verbal or behavioral disingenuousness, a phenomenon that contrasts directly with the oft-discussed sincerity of the Thaw period. Dissembling speech or other behaviors were often indistinguishable from good-faith participation in public discourse, and performed with such seamless irony or inner indifference that they entailed little risk of exposure for the insincere citizen in question. Yurchak, again, discusses this phenomenon in terms of Peter Sloterdijk's notion of "cynical reason" (Yurchak, "Cynical Reason" 161 *et passim*), viewing the *anekdot* as the marker of a behavioral middle path between the two undesirable extremes of communist activism and overt

anti-communist dissidence. The detached, savvy irony exhibited by the *anekdot*-teller allows him to reject the conformity of the *aktivist* without participating in the pathos-driven logic of the *dissident*. Recall the Dovlatov anecdote I cite in the Introduction.

The "naturalistic" performance of an *anekdot* in the context of everyday communication has another link—this time a contrastive one—to the markedly theatrical, professional nature of official entertainment in the Stagnation period. The frames surrounding popular culture performances—especially comedic performances—were over-determined in various ways. The *estrada* theater, for example, which had been a cultural form open to amateur innovation during the Thaw, was re-institutionalized as a highly professionalized form of entertainment with a robust "fourth wall," plenty of costumes, makeup, and sets, and a highly marked space in which to be consumed (the distance between performers and audiences at the theater was enhanced in televised *estrada* concerts). There were multiple markers of difference between the discourse of vetted popular entertainment and everyday, public discourse. The distance between these two realms was alternately bridged and blurred by one of Stagnation's most seminal performers and most recognizable cultural icons: Mikhail Zhvanetskii.

4.4. *NASH CHELOVEK* ON STAGE: MIKHAIL ZHVANETSKII

Mary Douglas describes the cultural figure of the joker as

> a privileged person who can say certain things in a certain way which confers immunity…. He has a firm hold on his own position in the structure and the disruptive comments which he makes upon it are in a sense the comments of the social group upon itself. He merely expresses consensus. Safe within the permitted range of attack, he lightens for everyone the oppressiveness of social reality, demonstrates its arbitrariness by making light of formality in general, and expresses the creative possibilities of the situation. (305)

Although Mikhail Zhvanetskii constantly tested the boundaries of "the permitted range of attack," Douglas's description captures his role in late-Soviet culture quite well. Despite his reputation as a latter-day heir to Zoshchenko in the capacity of Russia's satirist of record, and the fact that his works have been the most fertile source of "winged words" since the early-Soviet-era novels of Il'f and Petrov, Zhvanetskii has received scant attention from scholars. The neglect contrasts to the extensive commentary on other contemporary satirists such as Sergei Dovlatov, Fazil' Iskander, and Vladimir Voinovich. Zhvanetskii's association with television and the *estrada* tradition partly accounts for the lacuna, as does the aphoristic nature of his output, which seems to have inspired a similarly aphoristic (and anecdotal) response from most of those who *have* written about him.[193]

The links between Zhvanetskii's distinctive genre and the *anekdot* are many. Briker and Vishevskii write that his short monologues and sketches are all "pieces of a single text" (151), recalling characterizations of the *anekdot* as an epic in thousands of small pieces. Although he is a writer, he is better known as a performer of his own work (most of his writing—until recently[194]—has seldom been read from the page by anyone but him). While preparing a series of concerts for NTV's "television anthology" of his works in 1998, Zhvanetskii had to transcribe recordings of many pieces from the 1960s because there were no extant manuscripts or printed copies. He does, however, self-identify primarily as a writer—"concerts are my print-runs," he says—and he expressed surprise at being named a People's Performing Artist of Ukraine in 1999. It is surely Zhvanetskii's hybrid status as an *avtor-ispolnitel'* [author-performer] that most

[193] An important exception is the excellent article by Briker and Vishevskii, "Iumor v populiarnoi kul'ture sovetskogo intelligenta 60-x—70-x godov."

[194] A four-volume collection of Zhvanetskii's works (*Sobranie proizvedenii*) was published in 2001. The majority of the stories and monologues included in the anthology had never been published before.

clearly distinguishes him from his literary contemporaries and predecessors, and places him in the same discursive mode as the *anekdot*. Even a preliminary analysis of his style (like that of the *anekdot*) must incorporate both verbal and performative poetics.

Zhvanetskii's success in four different socio-cultural milieus—the Thaw, Stagnation, perestroika, and the post-Soviet period—raises a question: what was Zhvanetskii's place in Soviet culture and, considering his symbiotic relationship with the Soviet socio-cultural environment, how did he manage to outlive that chronotope and remain both creative and successful? The *anekdot*, by contrast, declined precipitously in productivity and popularity when the Soviet Union collapsed (see Chapter Six). The post-Stagnation divergence of two signature "phenomena" of the period—Zhvanetskii and the genre of the *anekdot*—deserves a closer look.

Zhvanetskii's creative origins lie in the amateur student theater movement that began soon after Stalin's death. Those theaters, especially the ones that specialized in comic forms like the monologue or the sketch, had to create their own repertoires virtually from scratch (Iunisov 12). So by the time Zhvanetskii moved to Leningrad in 1964 to write for Arkadii Raikin's Leningrad Miniatures Theater, he had already cut his teeth writing short comic pieces for his fellow Odessites, the actors Roman Kartsev and Viktor Il'chenko.

In Zhvanetskii's output during his years with Raikin, the themes that would come to define his subsequent, solo work are already present, though cast in a more broadly comedic tone than that of his later satire. The monologue "V grecheskom zale" ["In the Greek Gallery," 1966], for example, is written from the perspective of a working-class man determined to spend his precious Sunday off in his preferred way—getting drunk, eating canned food from the can, reading the paper—even though his wife has dragged him to the Hermitage art museum. In "Defitsit" ["Shortage," 1967], written in a similar style, the narrator defends the beneficial social

effects of consumer goods shortages, which, in the abundant future, he predicts, will themselves be a scarce, prized commodity to be shared behind closed doors with friends. Raikin softened the socio-political satirical potential of the piece by transforming it into ethnic *skaz*: he performed it with a Georgian accent.

In 1968 Zhvanetskii began to perform the material not used by Raikin at small readings in "houses of scholars," "houses of writers," and other such venues. At these events Zhvanetskii read pieces that he knew skirted the boundaries of the permissible, but he felt that his affiliation with the legendary Raikin afforded him a degree of immunity. In 1969, however, Zhvanetskii heard that Raikin himself was becoming averse to the increasingly pessimistic, politically caustic tone of his satire, not to mention his moonlighting, and wanted him to leave the theater. Zhvanetskii was puzzled to hear this news, and even treated it as a joke by slipping an ironic "letter of resignation" between the pages of the next manuscript he submitted. To Zhvanetskii's amazement and horror, Raikin took the letter seriously and signed it. The circumstances of their split—the mentor's literal interpretation of the disciple's ironic gesture—are emblematic of the ongoing generational shift. It was not merely Zhvanetskii's ironic worldview, however, that helped him thrive during his post-Raikin career in the changed cultural atmosphere; his chosen genre, his stage persona, his thematic range, and his textual style all resonated in the emergent cultural environment of the era of "developed socialism." The forms of his "atmospheric resonance" are similar to those of the *anekdot*.

By the early 1970s Zhvanetskii had perfected his trademark style: the cherubic author standing alone at the microphone pulling wrinkled, marked-up pages out of a worn leather

briefcase and reading them aloud in his fast-paced, Odessa-accented patter. From a theatrical point of view, Zhvanetskii performs "naked," without a costume or even a *kostium* [suit].[195]



Figure 1. Zhvanetskii on Stage[196]

He further eschews stage artifice by reading directly from the page, a demonstrative rejection of stage discourse's customary illusion of extemporaneity (a device used even by Anglophone standup comics, with whom Zhvanetskii is sometimes compared). The constant presence of the written text in Zhvanetskii's hands calls to mind another iconic popular culture image of reading from the page: Brezhnev jokes.[197] The image of the writer reading aloud from the page on stage also brings together the culture of letters and the orality of popular culture.

[195] Zhvanetskii's unadorned comic performances are reminiscent of a telling scene from Riazanov's 1956 film, *Karnaval'naia noch'* [Carnival Night], in which a retrograde bureaucrat and ideologue "edits" a clown act until the two performers are in suits and ties, performing the lines deadpan.

[196] From the website of the Vsemirnyi klub odessitov <http://www.odessitclub.org/club/images_president/zhvanetsky-400.jpg> 1 Sep. 2003.

[197] Another cultural image along these lines is the hapless protagonist of Aleksandr Galich's song "Kak vystupil Klim Petrovich na sobranii v zashchitu mira," ["How Klim Petrovich Gave a Speech at a Meeting in Defense of Peace"] who finds himself reading from a page a speech clearly written for a woman, but is caught up in the momentum of the ceremony and unable to stop (see Krongauz's analysis of the song in "Bessilie").

Another key element of Zhvanetskii's performance style is its rhythmic nature; Zhvanetskii has said that he composes in lines, like verse.[198] Many of his miniatures have a structure reminiscent of songs, especially those written in the *reprise* form, in which comic lines alternate with non-humorous narrative (Vishevsky 142). Some of his most famous pieces are built around a refrain, usually a comic line such as "gde nachal'nik transportnogo tsekha?" ["Where is the head of the transport guild?"] from "Sobranie na likerovodochnom zavode" ["Meeting at a Vodka Factory," 1970s[199]] or "v grecheskom zale, v grecheskom zale!" ["In the Greek Gallery! In the Greek Gallery!"] or "Normal'no, Grigorii! Otlichno, Konstantin!" ["OK, Grigorii! Excellent, Konstantin!" 1970s] from the monologue of the same name. These telegraphic lines, much like punch lines of certain *anekdoty*, have themselves become discrete bits of oral culture.

Commentators have compared Zhvanetskii's cultural significance to that of the so-called bard singers popular in the USSR beginning in the late 1950s. Andrei Bitov writes that Zhvanetskii's place in stagnation-era culture resembled that of his contemporary, Vladimir Vysotskii, whose voice could similarly be heard emanating from thousands of tape recorders in homemade copies (9-10). And like Vysotskii, Zhvanetskii for years occupied a place on the boundary between official and unofficial culture. During the 1970s and early 1980s Zhvanetskii himself was at times treated as a scarce commodity reserved for the consumption of elites. Many of his concerts were closed events accessible only through *blat* [connections or clout]. He once

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[198] There is a rhythm to his readings that is not merely audible, but visible, as one can see when one of his video-taped monologues is fast-forwarded.

[199] Since so many monologues by Zhvanetskii remained unpublished until very recently, many are datable only in terms of the decade they were composed. His recent collection, *Sobranie proizvedenii*, is in four volumes, each of which contains material from a different decade (1960s—1990s).

gave a command performance for the minister of communication in order to have a private phone line installed in his mother's apartment. His most exclusive performance was one he did over two-way radio for cosmonauts in orbit.

Despite categorizations of his texts as *rasskazy* [stories], Zhvanetskii's is essentially a dramatic genre. This is another way in which his work is closely related to the *anekdot*. Zhvanetskii's is sometimes professionally categorized as an *artist razgovornogo zhanra* ["performer of the conversational genre"]. The phenomenon of an aesthetic composition performed as everyday communication, as conversation, also evokes the *anekdot*. Vishevsky traces Zhvanetskii's style back to the *konferans'e* [emcee] of the Soviet *estrada*'s heyday. The emcee would appear between performances, and his commentary provided a common thread linking the various numbers together (Vishevsky 59). Zhvanetskii fulfilled a similar role for spectators of the "performance" of Soviet domestic policies; his commentaries bridged the disjunctures in official discourse. As in the society Petrovskii describes as being made up of "potential *anekdot*-tellers and listeners" (46), however, those spectators were also themselves potential performers in the "private theater of friends in small groups " (von Geldern and Stites 118-19). Zhvanetskii was both a behavioral exemplar and a source of verbal material; lines from his monologues entered the language, where they were used like proverbs or told like *anekdoty*. There was a link between Zhvanetskii and his audience in a broader sense, as well; he was a professional author and performer, yes, but he might also be called the spokesman for a millions-strong *anekdot* subculture within the society. A powerless subject of state discourse like everyone else, he actually performed his response to that discourse in public.[200] Briker and Vishevskii write of Zhvanetskii's "sgovor" [conspiracy] with his audience, a common

[200] During perestroika, some enterprising raconteurs earned rubles as "*anekdot*-buskers" on the Arbat and other pedestrian thoroughfares in Moscow (Valery Belyanin, personal communication, July 2002).

knowledge that is so "common" it need not be referenced explicitly (150).[201] The aesthetic value of maximally succinct reference to the tabooed unsaid, of course, is a crucial component of the *anekdot*'s status in the same period.

A characteristic device in Zhvanetskii's work is the metaphorization of one realm of everyday life—or everyday life in general—via another such aspect. In "Beregite biurokratov" ["Save the Bureaucrats," 1967], for example, the narrator urges the protection of the bureaucrat as a species, reasoning that in the absence of a bureaucracy with which to struggle daily, the average citizen will become weak. In "Bronia moia!" ["Tank of Mine!" 1980s] the narrator imagines how much more efficient and enjoyable it would be to make a trip to the market or the doctor's office in a tank. In "Sosredotochenny razmyshleniia" ["Concentrated Thoughts," 1960s] he suggests ways in which to harness otherwise wasteful physical activity to the cause of economic production. The drawing of lines between categories of Soviet life ironically evokes the Party's aspirations toward comprehensive influence on Soviet culture and everyday life. Yet Zhvanetskii's lines are ironically metaphorical; their actual effect is to demonstrate metonymical relationships or, more accurately, disjunctures, among diverse categories of existence.

[201] Stites is referring to a similar phenomenon when he writes of the existence of "themes, conventions, and commonplaces" that run across Russian popular culture genres and constitute a "cultural code [. . .], the secondary language that connects the artists and entertainers with their audiences and reveals certain values, characteristics, and aspirations of Russian people not easily discernible in ideology or constitutions" (5).

Zhvanetskii's satirical commingling of seemingly disparate realms exemplifies a basic comic device of the period: the production of a comic incongruity via exposure of an unexpected congruity. The *anekdot* often operates on the same principle:

> Анекдот 1987 г.: Иностранец закуривает на Красной площади. Милиционер ему жестами объясняет, чтобы он немедленно прекратил курить. Дисциплинированный в демократическом обществе иностранец тут же гасит сигарету: "А-а! Панимай! Аэродром, аэродром!" (Petrosian 23)[202]
>
> Иностранец в СССР посреди дороги упал в яму. Вылезает весь в грязи:
> —Как не стыдно! У нас, если опасность, ставят маленький красный флажок!
> —Ты, когда в Шереметьево прилетал, большой красный флаг видел!?..[203]

The first of these two *anekdoty* posits a "logical" explanation for the otherwise unmotivated Red Square smoking ban while referring implicitly to an episode embarrassing to the state: Matthias Rust's miraculous landing on Red Square in 1987. This sort of discursive engagement is a more potent form of satire than the light, generalized jabs at isolated social ills characteristic of official satire in the 1960s; a cause-and-effect relationship is depicted between two phenomena or institutions. This is a device Zhvanetskii's work has in common with the *anekdot*.

Zhvanetskii's colloquial, conversational style and his parade of idiosyncratic narrators evoke the *skaz* tradition, with the past masters of which he is often compared, especially Zoshchenko. The inclusion of Zhvanetskii's work in the *skaz* canon, however, is potentially problematic. *Skaz* in the traditional definition is a literary technique by which the writer creates the illusion of oral speech on the written page, for the reader's eye and mind's-ear. Zhvanetskii's

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[202] "A joke from 1987: A foreign tourist lights a cigarette on Red Square. A policeman explains to him with gestures that he must put it out immediately. The tourist, a well-disciplined member of a democratic society, does so and says in poor Russian, 'Ah! Understand! Aerodrome, Aerodrome!'"

[203] "A foreigner falls into a hole while walking down a Soviet street. He climbs out, all filthy: 'How disgraceful! In my country, they put a little red flag near hazardous areas!' 'Didn't you see a big red flag when you flew into Sheremet'evo [Airport]?'"

published works, however, have been described as "almost impossible to read" (Feliks Krivin comment, qtd. in Vishevsky 60). His role as the performer of his own compositions then becomes not simply one of interpretation, but of decodification, an element indispensable to the consumption and perception of the texts.

Another feature of *skaz* narration is highly relevant to Zhvanetskii: the complexity and significance of the relationship between author and narrator. The absence of a literal mask in Zhvanetskii's performance style is accompanied by a related difference from his earlier work, as well as from his predecessors in the *skaz* tradition. In contrast to early Zoshchenko (and to Raikin, for that matter) Zhvanetskii often collapses the distance between author and narrator. The *skaz* style, then, becomes an instrument not for satirizing a risible narrator's lack of cultural or intellectual sophistication—a sort of verbal slapstick—but a medium for the author's own more-or-less direct (though stylized) discourse. It is partly this perspectival agility that made Zhvanetskii's work officially suspect.

One of Zhvanetskii's best-known monologues in this regard is "Ikh den'" ["Their Day," 1974], inspired by a characteristically optimistic televised speech by the Soviet minister of meat and dairy production. The piece is a good example of the increasingly frequent autobiographical perspective in Zhvanetskii's work, as well as the essayistic tendency that would make his one of the leading voices among the creative intelligentsia during perestroika. In the monologue Zhvanetskii ironically addresses the incongruity between the everyday reality described in the mass media and that experienced by the average citizen, as well as the privileged lifestyles of state officials.

Unlike many writers and performers of his generation, Zhvanetskii has enjoyed a successful post-censorship career. One reason for this fact is Zhvanetskii's prescience during the

1970s; his thematic repertoire in the Brezhnev years anticipated (and helped to shape) the topical agenda of public discourse during perestroika: shortages, queues, bureaucracy, alcohol, gender relations, and an only semi-ironic appreciation for the value of hardship and struggle to the physical and social development of *Homo sovieticus* (and *Homo post-sovieticus*). Another reason for his sustained popularity is the sheer magnitude of his celebrity; Bitov does not exaggerate when he places Zhvanetskii alongside Vysotskii as an emblem of a cultural epoch. Another factor is the increasingly strong current of lyricism in his work, which distinguishes it from "pure" satire, heavily reliant on the satirical target. His lyricism is particularly apparent in his periodic "self-portraits," each titled according to the current year, in which Zhvanetskii mixes light, self-reflexive irony with hints at the socio-political atmosphere and more serious, philosophical sentiments.

Zhvanetskii's modal flexibility from one miniature to the next is a key factor in his professional longevity. It was also part and parcel of his discursive effectiveness during the days of censorship. Not only irony and cynicism were anathema to the logic of official discourse, but also the ease with which the ironic becomes the sincere or the nostalgic, and the satirical a performance of humility. Again, this flexibility is related to the complexity of Zhvanetskii's *skaz*, in which the degree of author-narrator identity ranges from the familiar model of the narrator himself as the author's satirical target to texts in which *skaz* stylization serves as the medium for authorial commentary or even self-commentary. His oral *skaz*, of course, also evokes the *anekdot*, a satirical form of orality that relies on a "conspiracy" between speaker and audience similar to the one that Zhvanetskii himself creates (Briker and Vishevskii 150). Zhvanetskii's move towards lyricism echoes an analogous, general shift away from cynicism in the direction of ingenuousness, even hope, during the perestroika period, when the *anekdot*

began its precipitous decline in popularity. In another sense, however, Zhvanetskii's self-referential impulse rehearses a crucial feature of the *anekdot*, one of the most reflexive genres in contemporary Russian culture. In Chapters Four and Five I examine the genre's multifaceted capacity for reflexivity.

5.0. CHAPTER FOUR: DISCURSIVE REFLEXIVITY IN THE *ANEKDOT*

> Два чукчи сидят на берегу океана:
> —Хочешь, анекдот расскажу?
> —Политицкий?
> —Ну!
> —Не надо, сослют. (Barskii, *Eto prosto smeshno* 33)[204]

Andrei Siniavskii (writing as Abram Terts) observed in 1978 that the *anekdot* is a rare example of reflexive—or, in his words, "self-conscious"—folklore (Terts 358). Siniavskii limits his discussion of "self-consciousness" to meta-jokes like the one cited in the epigraph to this chapter, but the descriptor "reflexive" is in fact applicable to a rather broader variety of *anekdot*, analysis of which reveals how the genre's capacity for self-regard (both by the text and by the discursive source of the text, i.e., the joke-teller) contributed substantially to its prominence in Soviet culture, especially during the Stagnation years. The *anekdot*'s reflexive tendencies distinguished it both diachronically, from its predecessors in the Russian oral tradition,[205] and

[204] "Two Chukchi are sitting by the [Pacific] ocean. 'Want to hear a joke?' 'A political joke?' 'Yes.' 'Better not. You can get exiled for that.'" See my analysis of the Chukchi cycle in Chapter Five.

[205] Meta-folklore was rare but not unknown in the pre-Soviet Russian tradition. In the mid-nineteenth century, Afanas'ev collected several folktales in which tale-telling itself constitutes part or even most of the narrative. In "How a Husband Weaned His Wife from Fairy Tales," for example, an innkeeper beats his wife for refusing to take in lodgers who do not tell tales well (*Russian Fairy Tales* 308). In "The Armless Maiden" the titular heroine tries to communicate with her brother and her husband in various ways that are thwarted by her evil sister-in-law and, after suffering a series of misfortunes—including, as the title suggests, amputation of her arms—finally resorts to the tale as a means of conveying the truth and defeating her enemy (*Russian Fairy Tales* 294-99).

synchronically, from its generic contemporaries in Soviet culture, whether unofficial (dissident literature) or official (the Socialist Realist canon).

In addition to meta-*anekdoty*, the following types of *anekdot* employ reflexivity of one sort or another: (1) intertextual *anekdoty*: texts that make reference to specific texts of other genres (a group that includes not just the classic cycles about Chapaev, Shtirlits, cartoon characters, etc., but also many political jokes); (2) meta-discursive *anekdoty*: texts that evaluate the nature and practice of verbal signification in more or less implicit ways; and (3) self-referential ethnic *anekdoty*: jokes told by Russians in which Russianness is foregrounded. At first glance this list may seem irresponsibly to conflate two distinct species of reflexivity: meta-textuality, on one hand, and self-reference in the literal sense of an individual or group's discourse about themselves, on the other. Russian jokes about stereotypical behaviors and character traits of the Russian (or Russo-Soviet) ethnos, however, are arguably intertextual in their own right, insofar as they often implicate extant textual representations of that ethnos. Their function often overlapped with that of the more obviously intertextual *anekdoty*: to engage critically the normative, inscribed models of social reality that dominated the corpus of texts available for popular consumption. Still, I have separated my analysis of Russian reflexive ethnic jokes (which I examine in Chapter Five) from the present chapter, which treats the first two varieties of self-referential *anekdoty* listed above.

During Stagnation the *anekdot* became not only a ubiquitous form of oral discourse; its tendency to engage with other constituent texts and genres of Soviet culture made it the genre of choice for popular meta-discourse. While *anekdoty* of the period do, naturally, depict actual personalities, relationships, and socio-political events, "anecdotal" significations of such things have more immediate referential links to previous significations: concrete textual representations

of “real-life” phenomena. Ol'ga Chirkova writes that *anekdoty* are constructed on the basis not of “realia as such, but those realia that have moved to the level of idea” (*Poetika* 8). Ideas are expressed in the form of discourse and, as Mikhail Bakhtin tells us, every unit of discourse—every utterance—is by definition responsive to previous utterances in the given cultural environment’s communicative chain (“The Problem of Speech Genres” 68).[206] What is significant about the *anekdot* as a speech genre is its tendency to display its responsive nature, to draw attention to its discursive position vis-à-vis other utterances. *Anekdot*-telling is not merely a response, but a performance of response, just as dance is both movement and a performance of movement (Bauman, “Performance” 47).[207] Performance as a cultural practice involves simultaneous use of and commentary on a medium of expression. Its reflective probing of “the formal features of the communicative system” (Bauman, “Performance” 47) is thus also reflexive; cultural performance is self-evident meta-communication.

Verbal performance is a reflexive form of discourse in the same way that philology is: the discursive medium—language—is also the discursive referent (although in philological analysis the reference is explicit). While this bootstrapping dilemma has the potential to undermine the

[206] Bakhtin calls the utterance “the *real unit* of speech communication,” a discrete speech act by an individual “speech subject” (“The Problem of Speech Genres” 71; emphasis in original). An utterance may be written or oral, premeditated or extemporaneous, as short as a single word in an informal conversation or as long as “a multi-volume novel” (“The Problem of Speech Genres” 60). Bakhtin’s broadly inclusive definition of the speech genre, while problematic, is a useful tool in dealing with the issue of the *anekdot*’s so-called “hybrid generic nature” as both a form of artistic [*khudozhestvennyi*] composition and extemporaneous, conversational [*razgovornyi* or *rechevoi*] expression. Bakhtin’s theory is also relevant to discussions of the oral *anekdot* versus the printed *anekdot*.

[207] Richard Bauman, citing Barbara Babcock’s ideas about the reflexivity of performance, writes that performance as a cultural practice is “signification about signification” that “calls attention to and involves self-conscious manipulation of the formal features of the communicative system, ... making one at least conscious of its devices” (Bauman, “Performance” 47).

objectivity (and therefore the credibility) of a scientific endeavor like philology, reflexivity only amplifies the discursive potency of the *anekdot*, a form of utterance that has thrived on "paradoxicality" (Meletinskii, "Skazka-anekdot" 319) since long before it became the chief medium for parodying the self-contradictory absurdities of ideological pronouncements. Because it is of the same stuff as its referent, the intertextual *anekdot* is able to assimilate all or part of a text from a different genre and then re-present it through the prism of the *anekdot*'s own generic logic:

> Во время доклада Брежнева в зале был арестован человек. Он оказался шпионом.
> —Как вам удалось распознать в нем агента ЦРУ? – спросил Брежнев у прославленного майора Пронина.
> —Враг не дремлет, Леонид Ильич, вы сами об этом постоянно напоминаете. (Iurii Sokolov 95)[208]

This text and others like it exploit the full potential of quotation as a discursive mode that "mark[s] discourse as the 'so-called,' [. . .] give[s] the discourse a suspicious integrity" (Stewart, "Some Riddles" 101). *Anekdoty* such as the one above are not mere quotations, but quotations "in drag," a form of oral philology that operates (and annotates) from a position not of scholarly detachment, but of satirical condescension. In the USSR the *anekdot* became an outlet for the otherwise restricted meta-discursive impulse of the educated, urban cultural consumer. The genre was also, of course, a means of expressing collective contempt for the source of the restriction—the state's illegitimate monopoly on textual production—and the resulting crisis of representation.

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[208] "During a speech by Brezhnev a man in the audience is arrested. He turns out to be a spy. 'How did you know he was a CIA agent?' Brezhnev asks the famous KGB Major Pronin. 'As you constantly remind us, Leonid Il'ich, the enemy never sleeps.'"

5.1. META-*ANEKDOTY*

As Terts/Siniavskii points out, the *anekdot* itself is not immune to its own predilection for critical meta-discourse. Except for a text that openly refers to itself, the most direct form of textual reflexivity is representation of other texts of the same genre, or explicit reference to that genre as a whole. The meta-*anekdot* was a significant generic subcategory that made just such reference, and which itself existed in several variants.

The *anekdot* engaged critically with the prevailing ideology on a direct, thematic level, and here too its capacity for generic reflexivity played a role. The genre became grist for its own mill initially as a result of its politicization by the state, that is, when arrests for telling or transcribing *anekdoty* became an element of the Soviet popular consciousness and experience. As I mention in Chapter Two, jokes about the political consequences of careless joke-telling became commonplace beginning in the 1930s, when the sentence for propagating or transcribing *anekdoty* was up to ten years imprisonment under Article 58 of the penal code. An example of such a joke: The state announces a contest for the best political joke. First prize: fifteen years.[209] Or: A Soviet leader (sometimes Stalin, sometimes Brezhnev[210]) boasts to an advisor that he himself has a large collection of *anekdoty*, and when asked how large, answers "nearly two-and-a-half camps' worth."

Another venerable *anekdot* references not only the illicit status of the genre, but the universality of its appeal and consumption:

> Судья выходит из зала заседаний и хохочет.
> —В чем дело?—спрашивает его коллега.

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[209] See Banc and Dundes's collection of translated (mostly Romanian) jokes titled *First Prize Fifteen Years!*

[210] As I mention in the Introduction, although arrests for *anekdot*-telling were a feature most characteristic of Stalinist culture, there were isolated episodes during subsequent periods.

> —Анекдот слышал, ужасно смешной!
> —Так расскажи!
> —Не могу, сам за него только что пятнадцать лет дал. (V. Bakhtin, “Anekdoty” 801)[211]

The practice of *anekdot*-telling is a narrative theme in Soviet *anekdoty* themselves for the simple reason that the practice was a part of everyday life [*byt*], a central medium for the representation of which is the *anekdot*. Common among this type of meta-*anekdot* are variations on the “numbered *anekdoty*” motif:

> В тюрьме уже тысячу раз пересказаны все анекдоты.
> Поэтому, чтобы не тратить времени, их пронумеровали.
> —Номер 67! —Смех.
> —Номер 52! —Смех.
> —Номер 41!
> Один из заключенных хохочет, как сумасшедший.
> —Да что с тобой?
> —Ой, в первый раз слышу! (Abdullaeva, “Vse my vyshli” 115)[212]

In other versions a newcomer shouts out a random number, prompting a reprimand for telling such a filthy joke in the presence of women, a dismissive rebuke that “he doesn’t know how to tell a joke,” or a gestured warning that there is a hidden microphone or a police informant in the room. The notion of a numerical shorthand for *anekdoty* is an implicit commentary on the status of the *anekdot* itself as a kind of shorthand, a distilled observation on a particular aspect of public or private life. The “jokes-by-numbers” motif also implies the shortage, and therefore the value, of fresh *anekdoty*, something addressed in the brief *anekdot* “Why did Cain kill Abel? Because he told old jokes” (V. Bakhtin, “Anekdoty” 799).

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[211] “A judge walks out of a courtroom chuckling. ‘What’s so funny?’ a colleague asks. ‘I just heard a hilarious *anekdot*!’ ‘Let me hear it!’ ‘I can’t. I just gave someone fifteen years for it.’”

[212] “In a prison all the jokes have been told a thousand times, so the inmates number them so as not to waste time. ‘Number 67!’ Laughter. ‘Number 52!’ Laughter. ‘Number 41!’ One of the inmates starts laughing like mad. ‘What’s the matter with you?’ ‘I never heard that one before!’”

Anekdoty about the culture of *anekdot*-telling were also an outlet for the popular impulse not only to violate taboos but to reproduce the pleasure therein in a symbolic way by *talking* about the violation of taboos.[213] Such texts are semantically akin to representations of other illicit activities, such as drinking, swearing, and fornication. A joke circulating in Moscow in 1999 acknowledges the simple truth that talking about transgressive acts can be almost as appealing as the acts themselves:

> Мужчина оказался на необитаемом острове вдвоем с Клаудией Шиффер. После некоторого времени он ей говорит, "ну, понимаете, я—мужчина, вы—женщина, никого здесь больше нет, наверно здесь и умрем. Давайте..." Она согласилась, они занялись любовью. Потом она спрашивает, "ну, как тебе, понравилось?" "Да, понравилось, но..." "Но, что еще ты хочешь?" "А можно ты наденешь мой костюм и шляпу?" "Ну, зачем, ты женщин не любишь, что ли?" "Конечно, люблю, но пожалуйста, надевай..." Наконец она надела его костюм, шляпу. Он говорит ей, "Слышь, мужик. Знаешь с кем я только что трахнулся?"[214]

Another category of meta-*anekdoty* depicts *anekdot* characters (or other folkloric characters) acknowledging their own textual status or telling *anekdot*y; the already tongue-in-cheek pretense of mimesis is demonstratively abandoned.[215] Textual self-reference of this sort

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[213] On the cultural significance of narrating one's own "mischief-making" activities (specifically among Russian males), see Ries 65-68.

[214] "A man is shipwrecked on a desert island with Claudia Schiffer. After some time has passed, he says to her, 'um, I was wondering. You're a woman, I'm a man. We might be stuck here for the rest of our lives. Why don't we... you know….' She agrees. Afterwards she asks him how he liked it. 'Well, it was great,' he answers, 'but….' 'But what? What else do you want?' she says. 'Um, could you do one more thing for me,' he says, 'could you put on my hat? And my suit?' 'What, you don't like women?' she says. 'Of course I do, but please, just put them on,' he implores. She obliges. He looks at her, puts his hand on her shoulder and says, 'Dude! Guess who I just had sex with!'"

[215] Alan Dundes gives an example of a meta-generic American joke: "It was a dark and stormy night and this guy goes up to this old farm house. He's a salesman and he says to the farmer, 'I'm a salesman, my car broke down, and I need a place to stay.' And the farmer says, 'That's all right, but there's just one thing, we have no extra rooms to spare so you'll have to sleep with my son.' And the salesman says, 'Oh

amounts to an exaggerated corrective to the hyper-mimetic, transparent texts of mass culture, which subordinated form to content while rigidly prescribing both. The *anekdot's* formal exhibitionism was anathema to the representational system of Socialist Realism, which had little tolerance for self-referential art. Once a text acknowledges its status as a text, its signifying link to "reality"—and its potential as a medium for the equation of reality with myth—is damaged or lost. The *anekdot*'s playful complication of the relationship between text and reality is sometimes an explicit narrative theme, for example:

> Штирлиц очнулся в тюремной камере.
> —Если зайдет солдат в немецкой форме, скажу, что я штандартенфюрер СС фон Штирлиц. Если же в советской, скажу, что я полковник Исаев.
> Тут заходит милиционер и говорит:
> —Ну и нажрались вы вчера, товарищ Тихонов. (Petrosian 5)[216]

Another example of generic reflexivity is the "super-*anekdot*" motif, in which a Soviet computer is programmed to generate the most typical *anekdot* possible, with results in which recognizable characters and situations randomly converge:

> Жена с любовником лежат в постели. Звонок в дверь. Вовочка бежит открыть, и там стоит Василий Иванович и Петька, оба евреи.[217]
>
> Рабинович спрашивает чукчу:
> —Василий Иванович, ты был в ОВИРе?
> —Там девочки еще Ленина видели. (Barskii, *Eto prosto smeshno* 32)[218]

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my God, I must be in the wrong joke'" ("Metafolklore" 509-10).

216 "Shtirlits wakes up in a jail cell. 'If a soldier in a Nazi uniform comes in, I'll say I'm SS officer von Shtirlits. If he's in a Soviet uniform, I'll say I'm Colonel Isaev.' A policeman comes in and says: 'Well, well, comrade Tikhonov, you sure tied one on last night, didn't you?'" Colonel Isaev is Shtirlits' actual identity in the film. Viacheslav Tikhonov is the actor who played Shtirlits. For commentary on the Shtirlits cycle, see Chapter Five.

217 "A woman is in bed with her lover. The doorbell rings. Vovochka runs to get it and there stand Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev and Pet'ka, both Jewish."

218 "Rabinovich asks a Chukchi: 'Vasilii Ivanovich, have you been to the visa office?' 'The girls there even saw Lenin himself in person once.'"

Some meta-*anekdoty* are part of a generic feedback mechanism that identifies particularly hyper-productive (and/or hackneyed) cycles or motifs by ironically laying bare their textuality:

> Василий Иванович идет по селу весь в грязи, в соломе, в дерьме, пьяный.
> —Откуда ты такой, Василий Иванович? –спрашивает его Петька.
> —Из анекдотов, Петька, из анекдотов.[219]

> По Невскому бежит еврей. Навстречу ему приятель:
> —Ты откуда?
> —Из анекдота! Генералы вытеснили![220]

Such reflexive treatment of jokelore in danger of losing its novelty served to "make strange" thematic or compositional patterns repeated in so many permutations that the only remaining direction for innovation was "up," to the meta level.

5.2. THE ABSTRACT *ANEKDOT*

The most extreme example of generic self-criticism in the *anekdot* is the so-called abstract or absurd *anekdot*. For example:

> Медведь и Лиса сидят на берегу реки. Приходит Заяц и спрашивает:
> —Мужики! У вас есть клей?
> —Нету, —говорят.
> Заяц убегает, возвращается через минуту с банькой клея, и говорит:
> —Вот вам клей.[221]

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[219] "Chapaev is walking through the village drunk and covered in mud, straw, and shit. 'What happened, Vasilii Ivanovich?' 'The *anekdoty*, Pet'ka, it's from the *anekdoty*.'"

[220] "A Jew is running along Nevsky Avenue in Leningrad. He meets an acquaintance who asks him, 'Where are you running from?' He answers, 'From the *anekdot*! The generals squeezed me out!'" This text refers to the wave of stupidity jokes about Soviet generals and their wives in the 1950s.

[221] "Bear and Fox are sitting on the river bank. Hare comes up and asks: 'Guys! Do you have any glue?' 'No,' they answer. Hare runs off for a minute, comes back with a bottle of glue, and says: 'Here you go.'"

Such jokes are reflexive in an etymologically literal sense: they "turn back on themselves" by inflicting the genre's signature device—a sharp, terminal disruption of the logical flow of discourse—on the genre's *own* expected discursive trajectory, towards a punch line.[222] They display awareness of the genre's conventions by ostentatiously violating them. Paradoxically, however, they are no less successful as *anekdoty* than normative texts of the genre; they fulfill the genre's most basic function: to evoke laughter. They are, then, simultaneously generically self-critical and generically self-regenerative.

Other *anekdoty* of this type pour absurd narrative content into an *anekdot*-shaped shell[223]:

> Мужик выходит на балкон с ящиком кефира и бутылку за бутылкой выливает его на улицу. Человек с нижнего балкона спрашивает:
> —Ты что, в шахматы играешь?
> —Как ты угадал?
> —Вон видишь—велосипед стоит. (Borodin, "Abstraktnyi anekdot" 87-88)[224]

[222] Although abstract *anekdoty* resemble the Anglophone shaggy-dog story in some respects, they differ from that genre in their brevity; shaggy-dog stories amount to practical jokes on the listener, who is tricked into paying attention to a drawn-out narrative under the pretense that the reward will be a humorous punch line.

[223] The abstract *anekdot* was not, incidentally, the only form of contemporary folklore to use the absurd to do violence to its own fundamental genetic code. Consider the *chastushka-neskladukha* ["misfit *chastushka*"], for example: По стене ползет кирпич, / Волосатый как бензин. / Эта песня про любовь. / Красной Армии—"Ура!" (V. Bakhtin, "Po stene" 9) [A brick crawls up the wall, / Hairy as gasoline. / This is a song of love. / Hooray for the Red Army!].

[224] "A guy goes out onto his balcony with a case of kefir and pours one bottle after another onto the street below. A man from the balcony below asks: 'What, are you playing chess?' 'How'd you guess?' 'See that bicycle over there?'"

> В ресторане посетитель:
> —Принесите мне кастрюлю супу.
> Берет и выливает себе на голову. Официант:
> —Что вы делаете? Это же суп!
> —А я думал, компот. (Barskii, *Eto prosto smeshno* 293)[225]

> Корова лезет на дерево.
> —Эй, Корова, ты куда? — спрашивает Ворона.
> —Да, вот, яблочек захотела.
> —Какие яблоки? Это же береза!
> —А у меня с собой. (Barskii, *Eto prosto smeshno* 292)[226]

> —Ворона, ворона! Сколько у тебя ног?
> —Две, особенно правая. (Borodin, "Abstraktnyi anekdot" 90)[227]

> Летели два крокодила: один красный, другой—в Африку.[228]

Even absurd *anekdoty* are not immune to becoming hackneyed and formulaic, and thus require periodic, prophylactic "defamiliarization" [*ostranenie*]. Consider, for example, the following hyper-absurd, embellished variants on two of the *anekdoty* cited above:

> Посреди улицы стоит голый мужик, через каждую минуту выливает себе на голову стакан киселя и говорит: Ку-ку. Подходит другой мужик и спрашивает:
> —Чего это ты делаешь?
> —В шахматы играю.
> —Давай я с тобой!
> —Давай!

> Стоят друг против друга: 'Ку-ку!' Третий мужик идет:
> —В шахматы играете?

[225] "A customer in a restaurant: 'Bring me a pot of soup.' He takes the pot and pours it over his head. The waiter says: 'What are you doing? That's soup!' 'Oh, I thought it was compote.'"

[226] "A cow is climbing a tree. 'Hey, Cow, where are you going?' asks Crow. 'Well, I wanted some apples.' 'Apples? That's a birch tree!' 'I have some with me.'"

[227] "'Hey, Crow! How many legs do you have?' 'Two, especially the right one.'"

[228] "Two crocodiles were flying: one red, the other to Africa."

> —А как ты догодался?
> —Да вон за углом запорожец стоит. (Borodin, "Abstraktnyi anekdot" 90)[229]
>
> Летели два крокодила: один зеленый, другой направо. Сколько весит килограмм селедки? (Да черт его знает!). (Borodin, "Abstraktnyi anekdot" 87)[230]

Such texts fulfill on the level of form, the comic utterance's role to which I refer in the Introduction: as "a remark on the indignity of any closed system" (Babcock, "Arrange Me" 103). Pavel Borodin writes that their purpose is "to expose the laws of the communicative act" ("Abstraktnyi anekdot" 89). In a logocentric, hyper-rational society, they amounted to symbolic "holy foolishness" [*iurodstvo*].

5.3. *ANEKDOT*-TELLERS AS MEDIA CRITICS

Briker and Vishevskii write of a common awareness among the educated populace that there was an abstract paradigm of the typical life shared by the members of that stratum.[231] They call this model a "cultural text," and write that it has an almost

> generic structure [. . .] at the basis of [which] lies a schematic description of the life of [. . .] the average person. All the elements of the description are so characteristic of all the participants that any one of them can superimpose it onto their own personal life and see that the two correspond. Moreover, the person

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229 "A naked man stands in the middle of the street. Every other minute he pours a glass of kissel over his head and says 'cuckoo.' Another man comes up to him and asks: 'What are you doing?' 'Playing chess.' 'Can I play?' 'Sure!' They stand across from each other saying 'cuckoo!' A third man walks by: 'You playing chess?' 'How'd you guess?' 'Because there's a Zaporozhets car parked around the corner.'"

230 "There flew two crocodiles: one green, the other to the right. How much does a kilogram of herring weigh? (Who the hell knows!)."

231 Suzanne Fleischman opines that the perception of meaning in texts depends on "culture-specific 'frames'..., clusters of interrelated expectations associated with prototypical experiences or situation contexts," and that these frames can refer to "real-world situations" and/or "textual worlds, which also fall into recognizable types—genres—to which similar sets of expectations attach" (3).

> will be surprised to discover that even the private, personal, individual and inimitable features of his life are already programmed into the overall schema. (148)

The links between that "text" and cultural texts in a more literal sense affirm Jaeger and Selznick's definition of culture as "everything that is produced by and capable of sustaining shared symbolic experience" (663, qtd. in Briggs 10). Language was a crucial medium for "sharing symbolic experience" within the educated collective to which Briker and Vishevskii refer. The lexicographer Vladimir Elistratov identifies a tendency of social sub-groups to use "linguistic doubles" of the standard language (600). The *anekdot* was part of such a discursive *Doppelganger* (sometimes called an "anti-language" [Halliday 570 *et passim*]), and the collective used it to comment on—and define itself in relation to institutions associated with—the "parent" language.[232]

The major conduit via which material passed from one pole of the Soviet diglossia to the other was the mass media, and prominent among the instantiations of mass culture that provoked popular response in the form of *anekdoty* are several films and television programs of the 1960s and 1970s. They provided thematic, compositional, and linguistic source material for the topical *anekdot* cycles that to this day account for a large portion of the generic corpus: Lt. Rzhevskii,[233] Shtirlits, Cheburashka, Sherlock Holmes and Watson, Vinni-pukh (the Russian rendition of Winnie-the-Pooh, which has little in common with the Disney version except being based on the

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[232] See also Wierzbicka, who writes that "official totalitarian language usually generates its own opposite—an underground antitotalitarian language" ("Antitotalitarian Language" 2).

[233] Later, Rzhevskii was often depicted in encounters with another fictional character, Natasha Rostova from Tolstoi's *War and Peace*, Sergei Bondarchuk's famous screen adaptation of which appeared in 1966-67. On the Rzhevskii cycle, see Visani.

book by A.A. Milne), and even the Chukchi cycle. The Chapaev cycle also dates from this period; the 1934 film enjoyed a renewed surge of publicity and popularity beginning with the celebration of its thirtieth anniversary in 1964.

Although these cycles were inspired by texts in visual media, the *anekdot*'s engagement of them was primarily meta-linguistic. In the post-Thaw years, visual culture had begun to reflect the resurgent logocentrism of official culture. Moreover, the *anekdot* favors dialogue as its chief compositional form, so it typically co-opts specific examples of dialogue from the source texts (e.g., the famous bedtime chat between Chapaev and Pet'ka). The only major cycle that does not rely heavily on dialogue between characters—the Shtirlits cycle—is based on a different verbal device: Emil Kopel'ian's voice-over narration in *Semnadtsat' mgnovenii vesny*. *Anekdoty* such as the following should be told using Kopel'ian's deadpan intonation:

> Штирлиц пришел к дому Гиммлера в красной вышитой косоворотке и с гармошкой в руках. Наигрывая "камаринского", он плясал вприсядку и насвистывал. Голос Копельяна за кадром: "Да, никогда еще Штирлиц не был так близок к провалу, как в этот вечер. (Belousov, "Anekdoty o Shtirlitse" 16)[234]

Film and television narratives also lent themselves to strip-mining by the *anekdot* because, like it, they are performance genres; the raconteur does not quote from *Chapaev* or a *Vinni-pukh* cartoon; he momentarily becomes Vasilii Ivanovich or Piatachok. Finally, with the rise of television viewership and the sky-high cinema attendance figures, the film and television media—part of an electronic-age phenomenon that Walter Ong calls "secondary orality" (3)—themselves functioned as generators of discrete bits of oral culture that quickly became common knowledge. In other words, Soviet mass culture itself became a prolific source of folkloric

[234] "Shtirlits arrived at Himmler's house in a red Russian shirt and carrying an accordion. He played a Russian folk song and danced squatting while whistling. Kopel'ian's voiceover commentary: 'Yes, never before had Shtirlits been as close to blowing his cover as on that night.'"

material (Lur'e, “Zhizn'” 8), part of the cultural reservoir of an urban, educated, mass-media-saturated “folk.” Occasionally *anekdoty* were referred to by joketellers as “communications of OBS” [*odna baba skazala*, “some woman said”], a reference to the ubiquitous phrase “communications of TASS” (the Soviet news bureau) (Thurston 550), a parodic gesture that highlights the status of oral humor as competition for the mass media.

A better term than citation or allusion for the *anekdot*’s engagement with material from other texts in that reservoir might be “abduction,” the most typical trajectory of which is from the realm of irony-deficient solemnity to one of pure irony. This is one reason that certain very popular films and television programs did not provoke *anekdot* cycles: because they themselves already privilege the ironic mode. Some examples are the films *Beloe solntse pustyni* [White Sun of the Desert, 1969], *Tot samyi Miunkhgauzen* [That Munchausen, 1979], *Dvenadtsat' stul'ev* [The Twelve Chairs, 1971], and the cartoon series *Nu pogodi!* [Just You Wait!, 1970s-1980s].[235]

Another reason certain visual texts inspired *anekdot* cycles more readily than others is that the source texts themselves resemble common *anekdot* structures and motifs. *Semnadtsat' mgnovenii vesny*, about a Russian among non-Russians, has a link to comparative ethnic jokes, e.g., about a Frenchman, an Italian, and a Russian on a desert island, in a plane about to crash, etc.[236] The film *Chapaev*, as I shall discuss in Chapter Five, is constructed as a series of brief episodes with simple dialogues, many of which end with (humorous or non-humorous) “punch lines.”

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[235] Arkhipova points out that *Nu, pogodi!* did not inspire an *anekdot* cycle also because its protagonists, a wolf and a hare, do not speak. On *Nu, pogodi!* see also Zabolotskikh.

[236] See Chapter Five on the significance of Russian protagonists in Russian jokes.

The *anekdot's* intertextual links are certainly not limited to popular culture; political discourse figured in the Soviet *anekdot* early in its history. Stalin-era *anekdoty*, like later ones, found comic material in Soviet leaders' use of language. Unlike Stagnation political jokes, however, which tend to portray members of the political elite as incompetent, Ivan-the-fool-like abusers of language, the older ones frequently emphasize the tricksteresque or even diabolical nature of official discourse and manipulation of texts:

> —Алексей Максымович, напысали вы бы маю быаграфыю!
> —Что вы, Иосиф Виссарионович, я в оное время отдалялся от партийных дел, многого не знаю, даже пытаться не стоит!
> —А вы папытайтэсь! Как гаварыт Лаврэнтий Павлович, папытка — нэ пытка!.[237]

Contrast the image of crafty Stalin transforming a proverb into gallows humor with the many jokes about Brezhnev's simultaneous dependence on and incomprehension of texts:

> Брежнев выступает на заседании:
> —Кто сказал, что я читаю по бумажке? Ха, черточка, ха, черточка, ха, черточка. (http://mandat.ru/anek_bregnev_050_060.shtml)[238]
>
> Брежнев в Средней Азии.
> —Салям алейкум! – кричат ему трудящиеся.
> —Алейкум салям! – отвечает натасканный по такому случаю вождь.
> —Салям алейкум! – кричат ему.
> —Алейкум салям! – отвечает он.
> —Архипелаг ГУЛАГ! – кричит подскочивший диссидент.
> —ГУЛАГ архипелаг! – отвечает Леонид Ильич. (Telesin 49)[239]

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[237] "'Aleksei Maksimovich [i.e., Maxim Gorky], you should write my biography!' 'Please, Iosif Vissarionovich [Stalin]. It's been a long time since I kept up with what's going on in the Party . There's so much that I don't know, it's not even worth trying.' 'Give it a try. As Lavrentii Pavlovich [Beriia, Stalin's feared head of the secret police] says, it doesn't hurt to try!'" [in Russian the proverb is *popytka— ne pytka*, literally "making an attempt is not torture"].

[238] "Brezhnev is giving a speech: 'Who says that I always read from a piece of paper? Ha, hyphen, ha, hyphen, ha, hyphen.'"

[239] "Brezhnev in Central Asia: 'Salaam aleekum!' the workers shout to him. 'Aleekum es-salaam!' Brezhnev replies, having been coached in the custom. 'Salaam aleekum!' they shout. 'Aleekum es-

> Выступление Брежнева: “Наша страна идет на говно... на говно... нога в ногу со всеми цивилизованными странами мира”.[240]

The *anekdot's* critical engagement of state discourse often involved isolating and excising a discrete unit of that discourse (slogan, neologism, acronym, quotation) from its communicative frame (speech at a state ceremony, political banner, socialist realist film or novel, history book) and transplanting it in an incongruous context (Chapaev and Pet'ka in Africa; a Marxist slogan uttered in a whorehouse; the first line of the "Internationale" in a telegram addressed to Lenin in the mausoleum). As Krongauz points out, Soviet state utterances were particularly susceptible to this basic comic device—incongruity between discursive content and context—because they were maximally reliant on their communicative environments ("Bessilie" 241). Thus, even a verbatim quotation of a political utterance amounted to a drastic reinterpretation of its meaning.

A good example of the popular perception of the political during Stagnation is the well-known *anekdot* about an encyclopedia of the future that contains the following entry: "Brezhnev, Leonid Il'ich—Minor political figure of the [pop singer Alla] Pugacheva era," which Tat'iana Cherednichenko tapped for the sub-title of her 1994 book, *Tipologiia sovetskoi massovoi kul'tury: Mezhdu 'Brezhnevym' i 'Pugachevoi'* [A Typology of Soviet Mass Culture: Between "Brezhnev" and "Pugacheva"]. Those two figures, she argues, represent the "public and private poles of the cultural continuum" during Stagnation (10).[241] As the joke indicates, the sphere of

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salaam!' he replies. Suddenly a dissident jumps out and shouts 'Arkhipelag gulag!' ['Gulag archipelago!'] to which Leonid Il'ich replies, 'gulag arkhipelag!' ['Archipelago Gulag!']."

[240] This is another untranslatable *anekdot*. Brezhnev says during a speech "Our country is going to shit... to shit... to shit..." [in Russian, *na govno... na govno... na govno...*], but when he finishes the sentence, it turns out he is saying that "our country is going in step [*noga v nogu*] with all the civilized countries of the world."

[241] A variant of this joke that privileges dissident, rather than pop, culture substitutes Andrei Sakharov for

the “minor political figure” was less and less able to compete for the public’s attention with the popular-culture realm ruled by icons such as Pugacheva. In fact, according to Cherednichenko, political texts and images were perceived and consumed by the populace the same way they consumed mass culture: as pure form with non-existent or irrelevant content. It was all, she writes, “la-la-la” (10). Another *anekdot* suggests that the Soviet subject’s tendency to conflate popular and political culture begins in childhood:

> Во время прогулки по парку воспитательница, показывая на ежика, говорит: “А это, дети, тот, о ком я вам много рассазывала, пела песни и стихи читала”. Один из малышей взял ежика на руки и ласково произнес: “Вот ты, оказывается какой, Владимир Ильич....” (Romanov 6)[242]
>
> Ожил Ленин и пошел гулять по улицам. Интересно ему: узнает его кто-нибудь или не узнает. Видит пьяный рабочий лежит.
> —Товарищ, вы меня узнаете?
> —Не-а.
> —Ну посмотрите внимательно!
> —А-а, я тебя знаю! Ты рубль юбилейный! (Romanov 11-12)[243]

The nature of the *anekdot*’s rehearsal of other texts distinguishes it from the traditional, uncritical performances by a “folk” of its native cultural reservoir. An intertextual *anekdot* removes discourse from its original context in order to exploit it in a new signifying performance. In this respect, the *anekdot* resembles ritual, which according to Richard Schechner is a performance constructed from pieces of existing signifying acts (specific movements, gestures, and invocations) that the performer treats “as a film editor treats strips of

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Pugacheva.

[242] “During a class trip to the park the teacher points at a hedgehog and says, ‘look, children, this is who I’ve told you so many stories and sung so many songs about.’ One of the kids picks up the hedgehog and says in a sweet voice, ‘so *that’s* what you look like, Vladimir Il'ich….’”

[243] “Lenin comes back to life and is walking around in the city. He wonders if he will be recognized or not. He sees a drunk worker lying on the sidewalk and approaches him: ‘Comrade, do you recognize me?’ ‘Nope.’ ‘Look carefully!’ ‘Oh, yeah! I know you! You’re that commemorative ruble!’”

film" in order to create a new signifying act (39). Susan Stewart discusses in similar terms the performer of riddles, jokes, and puns, whom she calls a "bricoleur" who transforms old knowledge in specific ways to produce "new meanings" ("Some Riddles" 99). Unlike a shaman, whose ritualistic use of "recovered behaviors" (Schechner, 39 *et passim*) as material for the new performance typically either affirms the original meanings of the material or uses it unreflectively, the *anekdot* performer's discourse is often directed in a triangulated fashion towards both the source text and the source text's own original referent in order to comment critically on one or both.

Sometimes, however, the *anekdot*'s mobilization of a prior text—especially if it is a text from traditional folklore or pre-revolutionary literature—implies a positive commentary on that text as a useful, discursively legitimate tool for socio-political criticism. *Anekdoty* frequently modify folkloric texts, such as proverbs and tales, for example, in order to comment on a contemporary issue. This device has been used in the post-Soviet period, as well, for example in the recent proverb/*anekdot* "Putina boiat'sia—v sortir ne khodit'" ["if you're afraid of Putin don't go into the outhouse"], which combines the folk proverb "volkov boiat'sia—v les ne khodit'" ["if you're afraid of wolves don't go into the forest"] with the new president's widely reported promise to "mochit'" ["waste"] Chechen terrorists "v sortire" ["in the outhouse"]. The use of literary allusions in political *anekdoty* is nearly as old as the Soviet *anekdot* in general; in her notebooks from the mid-1930s the writer Natal'ia Sokolova recorded an *anekdot* about the productions being staged at new Moscow theaters that season: at the Lenin Theater, *Gore ot uma* [*Woe from Wit*]; at the Stalin Theater, *Ne v svoi sani ne sadis'* [*Don't Sit in Someone Else's Sleigh*]; at the Kalinin Theater, *Ivanushka-durachok* [*Ivan the Fool*]; at the GPU (later known as

the KGB) Theater, *Iskateli zhemchuga* [*Hunting for Pearls*] in the morning and *Bez viny vinovaty* [*Guilty Without Guilt*] at night (Sokolova, "V zerkale" 374).

Despite its ostentatious, ludic exposé of signifying practices (including its own), the *anekdot* cannot historically be confined to the project of postmodernism (especially the Soviet variety), much of the cultural production of which is premised on language's essential failure to signify anything except other signifiers. *Anekdoty* certainly impugned the representational capacity of a particular language—the language of official Soviet culture—making the genre a kind of "postmodernism in one country." Its symbolic undermining of the representational authority of state discourse, however, was accompanied by a complementary project: the composition of an alternative, credible representation of popular experience. As Richard Bauman writes: "Cultural performances may be primary modes of discourse in their own right, casting in sensuous images and performative action rather than in ordered sets of explicit, verbally articulated values or beliefs, people's understandings of ultimate realities and the implications of those realities for action" ("Performance" 47).

Anekdoty were performances of a discursive schism in Soviet culture: the deep incongruity between official narratives of the collective life of the society, on one hand, and the popular, common experience of that life, on the other. Whereas official discourse emphasized brotherhood, unanimity, and the infallible word of the Party, the *anekdot* trafficked in conflict, dialogue, and contradiction. The genre's penchant for reflexivity, often critical, demonstrates the ways in which self-sabotage must sometimes precede reconquest. The same process is apparent in *anekdoty* featuring Russian "protagonists," to which I turn in Chapter Five.

6.0. CHAPTER FIVE: ETHNIC REFLEXIVITY

> Communist ideas and Communist deeds should blend organically in the behavior of every person and in the activities of all collectives and organizations.
> —*Program of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, 1961 (107)

> When news of the Russian conquest of space reached the Cosmos, Saturn hid his rings, Mars mobilized for invasion, and Venus put on a chastity belt.
> —Algis Ruksenas[244]

Russians—as the second epigraph above testifies—are sometimes the butts of their own jokes.[245] Although Russia is certainly not the only cultural space with such a tradition, self-inflicted ethnic satire is far from universal or even widespread among the peoples of the world. In *The Mirth of Nations*, a comparative survey of ethnic jokes, Christie Davies detects an analogous impulse in the humor of Scots, Jews, Newfoundlanders, and Australians. He is silent on Russians, but his explanations for the presence of reflexive ethnic jokes among those other groups help to illuminate the Russian case, albeit obliquely. Davies writes, for example, that an ethnic group might tell jokes about itself in order to maintain "ownership" of its stereotypical ethnic image and thus preempt the use of that image by more powerful and/or potentially hostile out-groups

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[244] *Is That You Laughing, Comrade?* 23. I cite this *anekdot* in English, as Ruksenas does in his collection of translated *anekdoty*, because I was unable to find the Russian original.

[245] As an imperfect hermeneutic compromise, I use "Russians" to refer to the strategically ill-defined Soviet identity, historically dominated by the Russian ethnicity.

(1). If (as I argue below) the image of the Russian in underground *anekdoty* functioned as an implicit rebuttal of state-produced or state-sanctioned representations of the Russo-Soviet "ethnos," then such *anekdoty* do evince a collective awareness of an out-group. The out-group in question was not an ethnic one, however, and the representations that the *anekdot* contradicted were not themselves satirical or openly hostile towards Russians or Russianness. On the contrary, the *anekdot* privileged a cluster of behaviors and character traits that were anathema to state discourse, an antidote to the constant self-aggrandizement of official discourse.

Soviet culture was the site of parallel discursive projects with incongruous strategies of representation, including strategies of *self*-representation. In other words, Russian *anekdoty* about Russians were in critical engagement with another extant font of textual production that was itself reflexive: the ongoing official autobiography and ethnography of the country and its citizens. That open-ended descriptive (and prescriptive) project was manifested—especially from the 1960s on—in cultural texts, film and television narratives in particular. It also found expression in mass-media treatments of events and processes in which nationality was underscored: references to the "friendship of peoples" in the multi-ethnic USSR, heroic accounts of Russo-Soviet empire-building (past and present), and news reports of the Soviet leader's latest meeting with foreign leaders. All of these motifs, of course, were exploited in the *anekdot*.

In this chapter I examine some of the implications of the characteristics that Russian urban folk humor has ascribed to the eponymous consumers of that humor. I focus on: (1) *anekdoty* that explicitly feature Russians or Russianness as the comic crux; and (2) *anekdoty* that do not explicitly reference the Russian as an ethnic category, but which draw from the same general well of character and behavioral traits as the clearly ethnic jokes, locating those traits in specific, archetypal heroes. I examine canonical cycles with superficially dissimilar subjects: the

Russian-Civil-War martyr Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev, the Chukchi of the Siberian arctic, and, briefly, the fictional Soviet WWII spy, Shtirlits. What the cycles had in common—in addition to the fact that they are all in one way or another based on cinematic images—was their protagonists' day jobs as anthropomorphic Soviet tropes. The post-Soviet cycle about the so-called New Russians, which I examine in Chapter Six, is an instructive epilogue to the story of satirical Russo-Soviet self-regard.

I am aware of the danger of interpreting as reflexive in-group humor a joke that is actually told by one sub-group about another sub-group in the same country (Russian Jewish jokes about ethnic Russians, for example, or jokes about Russians told in the non-Russian Soviet republics). The trajectories of satirical vectors are often tricky to establish, especially when studying the satire of a previous period so different from the present, yet there is no doubt that *anekdoty* about Russians circulated and continue to circulate within Russian oral culture, and so can be analyzed as instantiations (of varying degrees of irony) of Russia's self-image as an ethnic collective. The *anekdoty* in this chapter, like those in other chapters, have been: (1) published in Russia; (2) told to me by Russians; or (3) analyzed by others, sometimes explicitly in the context of "Russian humor about Russians."[246] Moreover, multi-national *anekdoty* (which I discuss below) typically portray a Russian and two or more representatives of Western (or at least non-Soviet) nationalities. If these jokes were actually intra-Soviet ethnic jokes aimed by a minority ethnicity at the dominant ethnicity, we would expect those minority groups themselves to figure in the jokes, either as victors over or victims of the Russians. They rarely do.[247]

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[246] See especially Khrul' (54-99).

[247] Such jokes did of course circulate in the non-Russian republics of the Soviet Union and in Eastern-bloc countries, but in the multi-ethnic *anekdoty* of urban Russia, which are my focus in this dissertation, the Russian is almost always joined by representatives of nationalities outside the Soviet sphere of influence,

Davies divides ethnic-group joke protagonists into those depicted as stupid and those depicted as "canny" (i.e., stingy and calculating), and further writes that reflexive ethnic jokes tend to emphasize the canniness of the group in question (*Mirth* 12). The jokeloric Russian is certainly not canny, and although there are of course *anekdoty* in which he (or occasionally she) behaves stupidly (in the tradition of Ivan the Fool), he has many other, equally (or more) canonical traits: drunkenness, belligerence, thievery, laziness, sexual boorishness, a compulsion to use profanity, and a knack for incompetent workmanship and destruction of property.[248] Here are three examples:

> Знаменитый русский певец Вертинский, уехавший еще при царе, возвращается в Советский Союз. Он выходит из вагона с двумя чемоданами, ставит их, целует землю, смотрит вокруг:
> —Не узнаю тебя, Русь!
> Потом оглядывается — чемоданов нет!
> —Узнаю тебя, Русь! (Telesin 147)[249]
>
> Секретная школа ЦРУ, где готовят нелегалов для забрасывания в СССР...
> —Итак, — подводит итог очередным занятиям преподаватель, — мы сегодня разобрали важную сцену "у винного магазина". Есть ли вопросы?
> Один из слушателей:

most commonly Americans, French, and English. There are, however, many *anekdoty* that compare and contrast a Jewish character and a Russian character (often along with representatives of other ethnicities, as well). Such *anekdoty* are a different animal, one that does not figure in my project, especially here, where my focus is Russian reflexive humor.

[248] According to a study conducted by I.M. Kobozeva, the typical Russian traits listed by Russians themselves include recklessness, generosity, laziness, simplicity, denseness, disorganization, unceremoniousness, superficiality, lack of curiosity, and a love of drink (qtd. in Timofeev 326).

[249] "The famous Russian singer Vertinskii returns to the Soviet Union after having emigrated years before, under the tsar. He steps off the train, puts his two suitcases down, kisses the earth, and looks around: 'I do not recognize you, O Russia!' Then he looks behind him and his suitcases are gone. 'Now I recognize you, O Russia!'" Aleksandr Vertinskii (1889-1957) indeed returned home in 1943 after having emigrated in 1919 (so this *anekdot*'s claim that he left "under the tsar" is slightly inaccurate).

—Сэр, у меня вопрос. Во фразе “Мужики, дают только по два пузыря на рыло” — где лучше всего поставить неопределенный артикль “бля”? (Alaev 80-81)[250]

Вопрос: Что такое—не жужжит и в жопу не лезет?
Ответ: Отечественный аппарат для жужжания в жопе. (Khrul' 49)[251]

The second of these *anekdoty* ironically ascribes one of the markers I mention above—a penchant for obscenity—not to the behavioral level, but to the grammatical structure itself. *Anekdoty* often code stereotypes in comically pseudo-scientific terms (for instance the comparative ethnic jokes [see below] that begin “They conduct an experiment to determine...”).

6.1. RUSSIAN OR SOVIET?

The first of the three *anekdoty* cited above is noteworthy for a very different reason: its fantasy of continuity between the pre-Soviet and Soviet instantiations of the stereotypical Russian character. In this way the joke defuses an anticipated objection that most of these texts target Sovietness, rather than Russianness, and should thus be considered “mere” political *anekdoty*, rather than reflexive ethnic humor. It is an understandable objection; there are many *anekdoty* in which the political system is the obvious target. The systemic features upon with they seize, however, are frequently similar, even identical, to the features around which *anekdoty* about

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[250] “A secret CIA school where they train moles to be planted in the USSR... ‘So,’ says the instructor, concluding a lesson, ‘today we worked on a very important situation: “In Line at the Liquor Store.” Are there any questions?’ One of the trainees asks: ‘Sir, I have a question. In the sentence, “Fellas, they’re only lettin’ us buy two bottles a piece,” where do you put the present-active participle *fuckin’*?’”

[251] “Question: What is it that doesn’t buzz and doesn’t fit up your butt? Answer: A domestically-produced [Russian] butt-buzzing apparatus.”

Russianness are typically constructed. In other words, the Soviet Union's stereotypical "behavior" and "personality" as a state and a geopolitical entity are extrapolations from the stereotypical Russian auto-profile[252]:

> Заспорили между собою врач, инженер и коммунист, кто был первым человеком на земле. Врач: Я был первым человеком, ибо без меня нельзя было бы из ребра Адама сделать Еву. Инженер: Нет, я был первым, потому что без инженера нельзя было построить мир из хаоса. Коммунист: Вы оба ошибаетесь, потому что не будь коммуниста, как создался бы хаос?[253]
>
> СССР – как амур: голый, вооружен и всем свою любовь предлагает. (Khrul' 76)[254]

The following *anekdot* implies that the Soviet system itself is a manifestation of a hard-wired behavioral template (or gene) that turns the maxim "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" on its head:

> Решили однажды провести эксперимент. На три необитаемых острова высадили три группы людей – англичан, французов и русских. В каждой группе – двое мужчин и одна женщина. Через год приплывают к англичанам. Те сидят по разным концам острова.
> —Почему вы так сидите?
> —А нас никто не познакомил.
> Приплывают к французам. Интересуются у дамы:
> —Как вы здесь живете?

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[252] Alexander Zinoviev writes that such an anthropomorphic view of the collective was characteristic of the citizenry as well, that the "intimate life" and "personal relations and activities" of the Soviet collective "bind [it] into something bigger than a family, that is into a sort of single personality: the super-personality of Communist society; into the kind of 'we' that has the right to regard itself as an 'I'" (*Reality* 122). Elsewhere he is even more explicit: "The behaviour of the Soviet Union on the world stage as a collective individual is a classic example of immoral behaviour" (*Reality* 238).

[253] "A doctor, an engineer, and a Communist are aguing: what was the profession of the first man on earth? The doctor says, 'I was the first man, since without me it would have been impossible to make Eve from Adam's rib.' The engineer says, 'No, I was first, because without an engineer it would have been impossible to create the world out of chaos.' The Communist says, 'You're both wrong. Without a Communist, where did the chaos come from?'"

[254] "The USSR is like Cupid: naked, armed, and ready to offer its love to everyone."

—Прекрасно! Один день – с одним мужчиной, другой – с другим.
Приплывают к русским. Видят: два мужика. Один сидит за столом, на столе – красная скатерть и графин. Другой сидит перед ним на табуретке. Первый говорит речь, второй время от времени поднимает руку – голосует.
Их спрашивают:
—А где у вас женщина?
—Какая женщина?
—Ну вам же оставляли год назад женщину!
—А-а-а, народ... Народ – в поле... (Khrul' 177)[255]

The reference to Soviet-style "affection" in the joke about Cupid, above, certainly satirizes episodes of Soviet militant imperialism officially coded as "brotherly support," but it also is closely linked to a motif found in apolitical *anekdoty* about what might be termed the "ruthless hospitality" of Russians:

Попали на необитаемый остров американец, француз и русский. Кушать нечего — стали рыбу ловить. И вдруг попалась им золотая рыбка.
—Отпустите меня, люди добрые, я выполню желания каждого из Вас, только отпустите — говорит.
Обрадовались пленники острова. Стали загадывать желания.
Американец:
—Хочу оказаться дома, в Америке, в роскошном доме с миллионом баксов в кармане.
Сказал и исчез.
Француз:
—Хочу оказаться в Париже наедине с прекрасной женщиной.
Произнес и тоже исчез.
Русский:
—Эх, славная была компания... Ящик водки и всех обратно![256]

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[255] "They decide to conduct an experiment. Three groups—one English, one French, and one Russian—are put on three desert islands. In each group there are two men and one woman. After a year they send a boat to the English, who are sitting on opposite ends of their island. 'Why are you sitting like that?' 'Nobody introduced us.' They go to the French and ask the woman: 'How are you doing here?' 'Wonderfully! One day I live with one man, the next day with the other.' They go to the Russians and see the two guys. One is sitting behind a table with a red tablecloth and a carafe. The other is sitting across from him on a stool. The first is giving a speech and the second occasionally raises his hand to vote. They ask them: 'Where's the woman?' 'What woman?' 'You were left here a year ago with a woman!' 'Oh, the People! The People are out working in the field....'"

[256] "An American, a Frenchman, and a Russian are marooned on a desert island. They have no food, so

The self-directed Russian *anekdot* not only pre-dates the October Revolution, but has outlived the Soviet Union by over a decade now (an example: "Что такое русский бизнес? Украсть ящик водки, водку продать, деньги пропить"[257]). Far from creating out of whole cloth a new stereotype, the Soviet context represented a new socio-cultural Petri dish in which long-standing native images of stereotypical Russianness could flourish with particular fecundity.

6.2. THE POLITICS OF SELF-REGARD

As I write in Chapter Four, reflexivity was one of the essential differences between the underground *anekdot* and official Soviet humor, which vigorously employed what Mikhail Bakhtin calls "the pure satire of modern times," with its culturally external (or isolated and anomalous internal) targets. Bakhtin contrasts modern satire with traditional folk humor, which was often self-directed by a community, a medium for the "laughter of the people at themselves" (*Rabelais* 12). The folk tradition is but one of the relevant influences on the contemporary *anekdot* and its utility as an auto-satiric medium, however. Other likely candidates include the penchant for self-irony among the intelligentsia,[258] whose folklore the *anekdot* arguably became

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they start to fish. Suddenly they catch a golden fish. 'Let me go, kind sirs, and I'll grant each of you a wish,' says the fish. So the castaways line up and make their wishes. The American says, 'I want to be back in America with a luxury home and a million bucks in my pocket.' He disappears immediately. The Frenchman says, 'I want to be in Paris with a beautiful woman.' He too disappears as soon as he's made his wish. The Russian says, 'Ah, what a great bunch of guys we had… I want a case of vodka and everyone back here right now!'"

[257] "What is business, Russian-style? Steal a case of vodka, sell it, and drink up the profits."

[258] The self-image of intellectuals was certainly affected by the state's inversion of the traditional labor hierarchy to reflect the worker state, an inversion reflected in the following *anekdot*: "'Доктор, я

during the Stalin period, and Jewish humor, whose own self-deprecatory tendencies are often noted but almost as often rebutted. [259] Both of these influences enhanced the element of reflexivity in folkloric expression after the intelligentsia became prominent producers and consumers of oral culture, in part due to vigorous Soviet censorship of written texts, but also because of the various oral emphases of urban popular culture: radio, cabaret performance, theater, film, etc.[260]

Of particular relevance here are the substantial ideological connotations of reflexive ethnic satire in Soviet culture, connotations that were—like those of the other types of reflexive jokes I discuss in Chapter Four—enthusiastically exploited in *anekdoty*. Comic self-deprecation by groups and individuals within Soviet society had inherent ideological bite, since aspersions cast on the character of citizens represented implicit criticism of the premises and methods of the presumptive engineers of that character. The state's celebration of the "all-around personality" of the Soviet citizen, the image of whom was exploited as a shining example of the superiority of the socialist "way of life" (Kelly and Shepherd, *Russian Cultural Studies* 9), is contradicted in *anekdoty* in which that citizen is depicted as the polar opposite of his official representation.

навещал своего родственника в вашей психиатрической больнице, и к нам подошел один больной—совершенно нормальный, разумный человек. Он работает мясником в магазине'. 'Ах, этот. У него мания величия. Это обыкновенный профессор'" (Barskii, *Eto prosto smeshno* 33) ["Doctor, I was visiting my relative in your psychiatric hospital, and a patient came up to us. He was a perfectly normal, rational man. He works as a butcher in a store.' 'Oh, that one. He has delusions of grandeur. He's really just an ordinary professor.'"

[259] See Rancour-Laferriere 42-50 on "masochistic tendencies among the Russian intelligentsia." On the *anekdot* as a form of intellectual folklore, see Borev, *Istoriia* 3. On the self-deprecatory nature of Jewish humor, see: Freud 133-37; Oring 116-28; and Davies, *Mirth* 51-75 and "Exploring the Thesis of the Self-Deprecating Jewish Sense of Humor."

[260] Stites mentions a common distinction between "folk culture" (rural) and "popular culture" (urban) (1).

Such *anekdoty* are not reducible to mere carnivalesque contrariness. In a society in which each member was expected to be a physical, moral, and intellectual example of the systemic legitimacy of "mature socialism," not to mention a synecdoche of the big-c Collective, any critical or negative representation of a citizen as such amounted to evidence of a desire to sabotage the nation's infrastructure and material resources. Recall the 1982 article from *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, which reminds readers that the "front of the war of ideas" is located within the "heart of every citizen" (Nerush and Pavlov 4). The *anekdot* suggests that an appropriate response to the myriad ideological intrusions inflicted on the mind and body of the Soviet citizen was a sort of symbolic idiocy (reminiscent of the tradition of *iurodstvo* ["holy foolishness"]) and self-parody. If the official national self-image was marked by an exaggerated egoism (with episodes of righteous sadism in defense of that image), urban folk consciousness countered with a form of stylized verbal masochism that drew freely on an existing tradition, strategically adapting elements of that tradition to contemporaneity.[261]

Anekdot culture occupied something of a third space. If the state held that all the achievements and noble qualities of the Soviet people were traceable to the fact that they lived in the USSR and were products of the socialist system, and the mainstream dissident (and anti-Soviet Western) view was that the achievements and nobility of the Soviet people existed *despite* their "captivity" in the USSR, the *anekdot* manifested the idea that any aspiration to nobility or great achievement plays into the logic of the non-ironic (and thus false, or at least unsatisfying or simply false) ideological poles.

The strategic self-defamation of Soviet man was accompanied by actual behavior that resembles that of *anekdot* protagonists. Zinov'ev writes that average citizens were "compelled

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[261] See Daniel Rancour-Laferriere's book-length study of Russian "moral masochism," *The Slave Soul of Russia*.

by truths and untruths (especially untruths) to adapt themselves to the conditions of life, repaying the torrent of lies and violence streaming down on them from above with lies, idleness, theft, drunkenness, hack-work, and other phenomena of this kind" (*Reality* 237).[262] Yet the behavior he describes does not amount to simple payback; it had elements of classic sub-cultural use of symbolic gestures. Stagnation was a time of crisis not only for the ideal of the Soviet collective, but also for the tenuous individual identity that had been staked out during the Thaw. The response from the urban populace was to form new kinds of collectives, many of them dominated by irony and/or by forms of alternative consciousness and behavior—alcohol consumption, deviant sex, and "reeling out" *anekdoty*. Engaging in such activities became a means for intra-group commiseration and cohesion, shared quotidian rituals around which more "organic" popular collectives could be constituted and sustained. Here is Zinov'ev again, describing a kind of "anti-collective":

> For a man to be recognized as a member of the collective he must possess a certain set of vices permitted by the collective in reality, although often they are officially censured. For example, drunkenness..., two-facedness, sycophancy, a quarrelsome disposition and absence of talent.... The collective, in fact, is essentially a union of injured, pallid, unhappy creatures which compensates for their defects. (*Reality* 123)

The "injured, pallid, unhappy" protagonists of *anekdoty* frequently defend their right to a squalid or otherwise defective existence, wherein the earth of the Motherland merges with collective feces:

> Сидит человек в яме с дерьмом, видны только голова и руки с книгой. Мимо идет прохожий.
> —Ой, несчастный, как ты туда попал? Погоди, сейчас я тебя вытащу!
> —Не надо, иди своей дорогой.
> Идет еще один по дороге, увидел человека в дерьме, бросился

[262] Miasoedov similarly reads Russian boorish behavior as a symptom of the socio-political environment (4).

к нему:
—Давай руку, сейчас я тебя вытащу!
—Идите, идите.
И снова углубился в чтение. Тут проходит мимо старичок:
—Милый, да что же ты там делаешь—в дерьме?
—Ну что вы все ко мне пристали—живу я здесь! (Barskii, *Eto prosto smeshno* 12-13)[263]

Сидят два червячка — сын и отец — в навозной куче. Вдруг сын-червяк спрашивает:
—Пап, а хорошо жить в яблочке?
—Хорошо, сынок, — вздыхает отец.
—Пап, а хорошо жить в апельсине? — не унимается сын-червяк.
—Отлично, сынок, — еще сильнее вздыхает отец.
—Ну, а тогда скажи, пап, чего это мы здесь живем?
—Понимаешь, сынок, — многозначительно говорит отец, —Родину не выбирают! (Barskii, *Eto prosto smeshno* 100)[264]

In addition to passivity, stubborn indifference to catastrophe is also coded as a tactical and desirable behavioral stance:

Летит над деревней Пиздец Всему. Думает: "Пиздец деревне!" Свистнул — нету деревни. Летит дальше... Видит — еще одна деревня. Думает: "Пиздец деревне!" Свистнул—нету деревни. Летит дальше... Видит — третья деревня. Думает: "Пиздец деревне!" Свистнул — нету деревни, один дом стоит. Свистнул еще раз — дом стоит. Свистнул третий раз — дом все равно стоит. Спустился к дому, стучится в дверь. Из-за двери:
—Кто там?

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[263] "A man is sitting in a pit full of shit. Only his head, hands, and a book he is reading are visible. A passerby says: 'Oh, you poor guy, how did you end up in there? Hold on, I'll pull you out!' 'No, that's OK, go on your way.' Another person happens by, sees the man in the shit, and reaches out to him: 'Here, give me your hand, I'll get you right out of there!' 'No, no, move along,' says the man, and goes back to his book. Then an old man comes by: 'Oh, dear, what are you doing down there in that shit?' 'Why is everyone bothering me? This is where I live!'" Barskii reports that this is (legendary film-satire) director El'dar Riazanov's favorite *anekdot* (*Eto prosto smeshno* 12).

[264] "Two worms—father and son—are sitting on a pile of manure. The worm-son asks: 'Dad, is it nice living in an apple?' 'It is, son,' sighs the father. 'What about in an orange, Dad?' asks the son, not letting up. 'It's great to live in an orange, son,' says the father, sighing even more deeply. 'Then why do we live here, Dad?' 'Well, son,' says the father with great seriousness, 'you don't choose your Motherland!'"

> —Пиздец всему, а ты кто?
> —А я Похуй Все! (Iakovenko 336)[265]

Both characters in this *anekdot*, in fact, exhibit attributes coded as positive, especially among Russian males. Nancy Ries writes that many *anekdoty* "glorified and reproduced the image of the Russian male/Russian *narod* as a powerful, menacing, mischievous hooligan, wreaking havoc on the societies and economies he/it touches, contaminating and spoiling everything along the way" (78-79).

The willingness and capacity to withstand suffering does alternate with a more negatively portrayed quality—abject submissiveness to the state:

> Посетивший СССР Никсон спросил у Брежнева, почему советские рабочие не бастуют. Вместо ответа Брежнев повез Никсона на завод и там обратился к рабочим:
> —С завтрашнего дня вам будет уменьшена зарплата! (Аплодисменты.) Будет увеличен рабочий день! (Аплодисменты.) Каждого десятого будут вешать! (Аплодисменты, вопрос: "Веревку свою приносить или профком обеспечит?") (Barskii, *Eto prosto smeshno* 101)[266]

These four *anekdoty* demonstrate the genre's role as a site for the negotiation of identity, especially identity in terms of power-subject relations. Because of the dual influences on the

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[265] This rather untranslatable *anekdot* depicts an entity identified as *Pizdets Vsemu* [roughly, Fuck Everything, though with a female connotation due to the word *pizdets*, derived from the word *pizda*, "cunt"] that flies over villages and destroys them (each time with the comment "Fuck that Village!") until it encounters in one village a house that will not be razed. Fuck Everything goes into the house and discovers that it is occupied by another entity (the immovable object to Fuck Everything's irresistible force), which identifies itself as *Pokhui Vse* [even more roughly, Doesn't Give a Shit About Anything, and this time associated with the male organ: the word *pokhui* is derived from *khui*, "prick"].

[266] "On a visit to the USSR, Nixon asks Brezhnev why Soviet workers never go on strike. Instead of answering him, Brezhnev invites Nixon to a factory. Brezhnev addresses the workers: 'Starting tomorrow, wages will be reduced!' (applause). 'And the workday will be extended!' (applause). 'And every tenth worker will be hanged!' (applause and a question from the audience: 'Should we bring our own ropes or will they be provided by the union committee?')."

anekdot of the state's national legitimization myth and the native folk tradition, that negotiation had a strong element of ethnic consciousness. The tradition of self-degradation and self-ridicule in Russian popular culture—in addition to the *iurodivyi*, recall the *skomorokh* and the buffoon—incorporated visual, behavioral, and verbal aspects, but became primarily verbal in the urbanized, logocentric Soviet century. Yet *anekdoty* are linked to the physical realm in multiple ways, and can thus be reminders of the individual subject's "ontological status" (Stewart, "Some" 100). Moreover, they can function as assertions of the primacy of that status in relation to the contrived, abstract subject posited as genuine and normative by the culture industry and other kinds of mass textual production. Reflexive Russian ethnic jokes emphasize the physical aspects of the stereotype, reflecting the carnality that had long been part of the folk tradition itself, but which mass-media discourse and image-production did not reflect, despite the traditional elements therein.

The *anekdot*'s own visceral associations enhanced its value as a medium for expressing this alternative category of identity. Those associations are not only thematic, but extra-textual, and are present in the communicative process of joke-telling itself. The *anekdot* was meta-transgressive, simultaneously a medium for depicting taboo-breaking behavior and itself a form of taboo-breaking behavior. This combination of verbal and performative non-conformity had particular potency in an atmosphere in which verbal taboos were so highly charged. Also, as Koestler suggests, laughter is distinctive among human reflexes because it is a physical response triggered by a cognitive stimulus: the comic (31). Joke-telling is thus a point of contact between the visceral and the abstract, between the mundane and the aesthetic, between the realm of the mind and the realm of the mouth. In this sense it is metaphorically (not just metonymically) linked to drinking alcohol, another activity that combines, though in a converse way, the material

and the mental (perhaps partially explaining alcohol's status as an obligatory accompaniment to *anekdoty*).[267] Joke-telling and drunkenness—along with other pastimes such as sex and fist-fighting—are self-induced reminders of the subject's biological existence.

Despite its fetish for "diamat" [dialectic materialism], the culture industry and the mass media continued to generate models and texts that resembled less and less the empirically acquired knowledge of the subjects and consumers of those texts. One might object that this is true of mass culture anywhere, but the gap was especially wide in the Soviet case, in part because of the absence of market forces that afford consumer desires—especially physical desires—an influence on mass media content.[268] The prevalence of reflexive references to the physical life of *Homo sovieticus* in the *anekdot* was thus compensatory; the genre functioned as an outlet for the otherwise stifled impulse of the "folk" to narrate and perform its ongoing physical biography. Popular behaviors and cultural practices represented a deep-tissue parody of state ideology, which posited in materialist theory an essential link between the physical and the mental/spiritual (expressed in ideas such as base and superstructure, and less esoterically in Feuerbach's famous statement "you are what you eat") while producing abstract discursive models that were actually diametrical opposites of lived experience.

In a perverse way, Stalinism had demonstrated a keen interest in the links between texts and bodies, since it destroyed so many of the latter for producing the former. In the post-gulag age, ideology squandered its connection with the physical realm in part because ideological proscriptions and prescriptions ceased to be regularly enforced with physical violence. The

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[267] I consider the place of vodka in Russian culture in Chapter Six**.**

[268] As I discuss in Chapter Six, the sudden appearance of such forces in the post-Soviet period helped to hamstring the *anekdot*.

standard procedure became: violence to the texts themselves, rather than to their authors (shelving films, confiscating manuscripts and typewriters, bulldozing paintings at an unauthorized exhibition, etc.).

6.3. MULTI-ETHNIC *ANEKDOTY*

A particularly common type of *anekdot* in which the Russian is featured as a category, and in which his physical and other characteristics are especially prominent, is what might be called the United-Nations joke.[269] These involve characters representing two or more nationalities (typically three, but as many as fifteen[270]) most typically depicted in a single extraordinary

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[269] Dundes calls the phenomenon of multi-ethnic jokes "international slurs" ("Slurs International" 97). Khrul' calls the Russian variant of this type of joke the "Russian and Others" [*Russkii i drugie*] cycle (54 and *passim*). Shmeleva and Shmelev call them "multi-national" jokes (*Russkii anekdot* 75).

[270] To wit: "Чем женщины различных стран удерживают своих мужей: американка – делом, француженка – телом, полька – шиком, еврейка – криком, англичанка – воспитанием, немка – питанием, шведка – здоровьем, финка – хладнокровием, мадьярка – умением, индианка – терпением, мексиканка – местью, китаянка – лестью, японка – грацией, русская – парторганизацией" (Khrul' 186) ["How do women of various countries hold onto their men? American (women): with business. French: with their bodies. Polish: with cleverness. Jewish: with shouts. English: with breeding. German: with food. Swedish: with health. Finnish: with sang-froid. Hungarian: with know-how. Indian: with patience. Mexican: with vengeance. Chinese: with flattery. Japanese: with grace. Russian: with the Party Organization"]. Some of the humor of this *anekdot* relies on the fact that the nationalities are listed in rhymed pairs ("Amerikanka – delom, frantsuzhenka – telom...").

Karachevtsev includes a similar, but apolitical (and non-rhyming) *anekdot* in his collection from the 1930s: "Почему женщины любят? Итальянка – по темпераменту. Испанка – для удовольствия. Немка – из чувственности. Турчанка – по привычке. Австрийка – из любви к искусству. Голландка – по обязанности. Англичанка – для здоровья. Креолка – по инстинкту. Американка – по разсчету. Француженка – из любопытства. Венгерка – по призванию. Еврейка – по увлечению. Шведка – от нечего делать. Японка – из гостеприимства. Русская – по всем этим причинам вместе взятым" (*"Dlia nekuriashchikh"* 88) ["Why do women love? Italian (women) – due

situation, competition, or controlled experiment that demonstrates the essential character of each group. Such jokes are common in many (perhaps most) countries, but the Russian variant is distinctive for its consistent placement of the Russian himself (or herself) in the final, "humor-bearing" position. The punch line represents a "triumph," sometimes life-saving, for the Russian:

> Поймали инопланетяне 3-х человек (немца, француза и русского). Закрыли в разных камерах, дали по два стальных шара и сказали: Кто нас утром удивит того и отпустим!!! Утром. Немец жанглирует шарами. Француз жанглирует шарами и при этом танцует и поет! Ну, решили отпустить Француза (что еще можно сделать с шарами в комнате без окон и дверей?) Ради эксперимента решили зайти к русскому. Через 5 минут заходят к французу и говорят, что домой летит русский. Француз в шоке: "Что он сделал что я не сделал?" Русский один шар потерял а другой сломал!!"[271]
>
> Поймали дикари русского, француза и англичанина и говорят: "Всех съедим. Помилуем только того, чье эхо в лесу продержится дольше всех.
> Англичанин крикнул: хау ду ю ду!..
> —ду-ду-ду... – отозвалось эхо.
> Француз закричал еще сильнее: шерше ля фам!
>
> Эхо продержалось дольше.
> Русский вышел и спокойно сказал: водку дают.
> —где-где-где... — долго не могло успокоиться эхо. (Khrul' 181)[272]

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to temperament. Spanish – for pleasure. German – out of sensitivity. Turkish – out of habit. Austrian – out of a love for art. Dutch – out of obligation. English – for health. Creole – out of instinct. American – for profit. French – out of curiosity. Hungarian – by vocation. Jewish – out of passion. Swedish – out of boredom. Japanese – out of hospitality. Russian – for all of these reasons combined"].

[271] "Three men are abducted by extraterrestrials (a German, a Frenchman, and a Russian). They are locked in separate rooms, given two steel spheres each, and told that the one who does the most amazing thing with them the next morning will be released. Morning. The German is juggling the spheres. The Frenchman is juggling while singing and dancing. They decide to release the Frenchman (what else could be done with the spheres in a room without windows or doors?). Just to complete the experiment, they look in on the Russian. Five minutes later they go to the Frenchman and tell him that the Russian will be sent home. The Frenchman is in shock: 'What did he do that I didn't do?' 'He lost one sphere and broke the other!!'"

[272] "A Russian, a Frenchman, and an Englishman are captured by cannibals. The cannibals tell them:

Идет симпозиум воров всего мира. Встает вор из Франции и просит погасить свет на 30 секунд. Через 30 секунд с того же места, на котором он стоял, говорит: "Господин в белом смокинге, на противоположной от меня трибуне, возьмите свою авторучку". После чего встал американец. История повторилась. После американца встал русский и сказал: "Свет тушить не надо. Вася, раздай всем носки". (*Anekdoty nashikh chitatelei* 1: 21)[273]

The penchant for satirical self-representation in Russia has long co-existed and jockeyed for cultural and philosophical dominance with an opposing impulse: arrogant nationalism. Soviet nationalism was frequently expressed in texts lionizing various heroes of the pre-Soviet and Soviet past. A central purpose of the Soviet approach to Russian history was to establish a chain of enlightened countrymen in order to demonstrate the historical inevitability of socialism's triumph. Rapid establishment of a deep, native source for the ruling ideology was an important preemptive rebuttal of claims that the October Revolution imposed an imported ideology on Russia from without. Such hurried mythmaking was essential to the still tenuously victorious Bolsheviks, who sensibly felt an urgent need for self-legitimation via epic inscription of their brief past (see Chapter Two). From the contemporary historical perspective, every epoch had its heroic (proto-socialist or socialist) representative: Sten'ka Razin, Emel'ian Pugachev, the Decembrists, Herzen, Chernyshevskii, etc.

'We're going to eat you all, except for the one who can make an echo in the forest last the longest.' The Englishman shouts, 'How do you do!...' and the echo responds: 'do...do...do....' The Frenchman yells even louder: 'Cherchez la femme!...' and his echo lasts even longer. The Russian calmly steps up and says: 'Vodka for sale.' 'Where?... where?... where?...' comes the echo and doesn't fade for a long time."

[273] "A symposium of thieves from around the world. A thief from France stands up and asks that the lights be dimmed for thirty seconds. After thirty seconds, from the same spot where he stood before, he says, 'The gentleman in the white jacket sitting in the section opposite from where I am standing, please come and get your fountain pen.' Next, an American stands up and does a similar trick. After the American, a Russian stands up and says, 'No need to dim the lights. Vasia, give everyone back their socks.'"

The omni-historical scope of the *anekdot* corpus also serves to establish the presence of native, trickster-like "heroes" throughout the Russian millennium. Accordingly, each period is also associated with an anecdotal "anti-hero": Lieutenant Rzhevskii, Chapaev, Shtirlits, etc. Since official hagiographies and popular texts about folk heroes often tapped the same cultural tropes, there was overlap and dialogue between the two. The role of the anti-heroes is similar, in fact, to the actual mission of Shtirlits, the spy: to represent the interests of the Russian people "behind enemy lines," be it Nazi Germany or in a calcified domestic cultural environment that officially denies recognition of essential native ethnic features. The state frequently embedded behavioral models and personality features that it advocated inside cultural icons, both historical and fictional. The *anekdot* did, as well.

6.4. CHAPAEV

The symbiotic relationship between the *anekdot* and the hothouse fakelore of Soviet myth production that provided a steady supply of models for it is especially evident in the vast corpus of jokes that feature Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev (1887-1919), commander of the 25th Infantry Division of the Red Army. In Chapter Four I demonstrate the ways in which the Soviet *anekdot* was a rare form of self-referential folklore. Some time during the heyday of Stagnation, one *anekdot* informs us, the Soviet government programmed a computer to determine the most popular *anekdot*, with the following result:

> Идет по Красной площади Василий Иванович Чапаев и встречает Владимира Ильича Ленина. И Владимир Ильич

спрашивает Василия Ивановича (с еврейским акцентом):
—А что, Абгам, не пога ли в Изгаиль?! (Terts 90)[274]

If Lenin (along with Stalin for a time) was the dominant figure in the official national iconography and autobiography, Chapaev—himself a deity in the Soviet mytho-historical pantheon—fulfilled an analogous role in the popular imagination, where his relevance seems to have outlived that of the other two. Since shortly after his death in 1919,[275] Chapaev has enjoyed a legendary reputation in a variety of cultural contexts; he has been a hero of print and visual media, fakelore, folklore, and jokelore alike. He remains a popular icon to a "folk" that is still steeped in a detailed knowledge of (and a complex, ironic yet nostalgic stance towards) Soviet mass culture.

The enormous cycle of *anekdoty* about Chapaev is both a result of and an engine for the continuation of his popular appeal. His preeminence as a joke protagonist even today, a dozen years after the end of the Soviet power that he helped establish, was confirmed by a 1999 survey asking Russians about which subjects they most often tell or hear *anekdoty*: 15% named Chapaev; 14%— the New Russians (see Chapter Six); 11%—the foul-mouthed class clown, Vovochka; 8%—the Chukchi (see below); 4%—Jews; 2%—alcoholics and dystrophics; and 1%—Radio Armenia.[276]

Unlike many of the other models for popular Soviet joke cycles, Chapaev was, of course, an actual historical figure, a famed peasant-general who died in battle while swimming across the Ural River. His canonization was rapid. Dmitrii Furmanov's 1923 factographic novel,

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[274] "Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev is walking on Red Square and he meets Vladimir Il'ich Lenin. And Vladimir Il'ich asks Vasillii Ivanovich (with a Jewish accent): 'So, Abram, isn't it time we left for Israel already?'"

[275] Chapaev was reportedly legendary even before his death (Muratov 169).

[276] <http://www.podolsk.ru/newsf.php3?detail=n985061017.news>. Accessed April 12, 2000.

Chapaev, was perennially listed among workers' favorite books beginning soon after its publication. The proto-Socialist-Realist text firmly inscribed Chapaev in the fledgling Soviet state-creation mythology less than four years after his death. His fame is based primarily, however, on the Vasil'ev Brothers' seminal 1934 film, *Chapaev*.[277] Although the *anekdoty* date from three decades after the film's initial release, they play specifically on the image of Chapaev therein.

In a front-page *Pravda* article published in 1935, not long after its release, the spectators' experience of the film is described for the benefit of those unfortunate comrades who have not yet seen it:

> The lights go down in the cinema, a blue beam floods out of the projecting booth, the equipment makes a noise behind the audience's back and suddenly the dim swarm of shadows on the screen gives way to an animated story, the stern and proud story of our battle and our victories. The film captivates the audience from the very first moments, it enthralls and moves them with each last shot, it infects them with love and hate, ecstasy and fear, joy and rage from scene to scene. ("*Chapaeva* posmotrit vsia strana," qtd. in Taylor and Christie 334)

Over the next several decades, and indeed to the present day, the story and character of Chapaev has inspired countless verbal, visual, and behavioral homages of the most varied sort, across the entire spectrum of regard from ironic mockery to panegyric awe. Osip Mandel'shtam, who would die in the gulag for his "anti-Sovietism" before the decade was out, wrote excitedly of the *Chapaev* film in a 1935 poem:

> [. . .] В открытые рты нам
> Говорящий Чапаев с картины скакал звуковой—
> [. . .]
> Умереть и вскочить на коня своего! (164)[278]

[277] The co-directors, Georgii Vasil'ev and Sergei Vasil'ev, listed on the credits as the Vasil'ev Brothers [*Brat'ia Vasil'evy*], were not really brothers; they merely shared the same last name.

[278] "[. . .] Into our open mouths / Talking Chapaev galloped from the sound screen— / [. . .] / To die and

Mandel'shtam's appreciation of "talking Chapaev" is a clue to the character's initial appeal; the film was among the first Soviet talkies, and Chapaev was certainly the first Soviet film icon of the sound era. Cinematic positive heroes lent themselves more readily than literary protagonists to immortalization in *anekdoty* because the *anekdot* itself (as I argue in Chapter Three) is a dramatic genre, so it easily assimilates filmic forms of discourse such as dialogue and third-person voice-over narration (the Shtirlits cycle would exploit the latter device, used extensively in its source text). The Chapaev film, moreover, is constructed from a series of episodes that each has its own miniature narrative or dialogic arc, often ending with a sort of "punch line." Like punch lines, several of those bits of dialogue have entered the language as "winged words," for example: "Клистирные отродки!" ["Enema tubes!"]; "Македонский? Полководец? Кто такой, почему не знаю?" ["Alexander of Macedonia? He's a general? Who is he, and how come I don't know him?"]; "Психическая? Ну хрен с ней, давай психическую" ["A psychological attack? Hell, bring on the psychological attack"]; "Тихо, граждане! Чапай думать будет" ["Quiet, citizens! Chapai is going to think!"]; "Ты что, над Чапаевым издеваться?" ["Are you making fun of Chapaev?!"]; "Учи, дьявол, пулемету!" ["Teach me the machine gun, you devil!"]; "Я академиев не проходил, я их не закончил" ["I didn't go to no academies, I'm no graduate"]; "Красиво идут! — Интеллигенция" ["They march beautifully" "Intelligentsia"]; "Белые пришли – грабют, красные пришли – грабют. Ну куды крестьянину податься?" [The Whites came and looted, the Reds came and looted. Where's a peasant s'posed to turn?"] (Kozhevnikov 376-77).

Among the scenes most commonly referenced in jokes is one in which Chapaev and his trusty orderly, Pet'ka, are talking late at night on the eve of a battle. The two warriors have just

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jump onto his horse!"

finished singing a touching duet about trying to thwart the *chernyi voron* ["black raven"].[279] Pet'ka, appropriately awed by his commander and role model, asks him a series of four questions about the extent of his military prowess. To Pet'ka's first three inquiries, about whether Division Commander Chapaev could command a battalion, an entire army, even the combined Soviet armed forces, the general replies in the affirmative. To the by-now enraptured Pet'ka's fourth question, however—could Chapaev command the combined armies of all the nations in the world—the commander thinks for a moment before answering that no, he could not, because he does not speak any foreign languages.

The "bedroom" scene itself mimics (yet ultimately violates) one of the cardinal rules of joke composition—the rule of "threes"—and even has a punch line of sorts. In this respect, the numerous jokes that satirically rehearse the scene are both mocking and corrective, and satirize both the implied skill of the general and the attempt at folksy humor on the part of the filmmakers. The anecdotal versions of the exchange nudge the situation into the realm of the vulgar, the prosaic (and the Russian) by, for example, substituting alcohol consumption or sex—important cultural behaviors that the film ignores—for military planning:

> —Василий Иванович, а вы пол-литра можете выпить?
> —Могу, Петя, могу!
> —А литр?
> —Могу, Петя, могу!
> —А бочку водки?
> —Могу, Петя, могу!
> —А реку водки?
> —Нет, Петя, не могу. Где же я возьму такой огурец, чтоб ее закусить![280]

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[279] The raven in the song is a symbol of battlefield death; the bird picks at the corpse of the dead soldier.

[280] "'Vasilii Ivanovich, could you drink a half-liter?' 'Sure, Pet'ka, sure!' 'What about a liter?' 'Sure, Pet'ka, sure!' 'What about a barrel of vodka?' 'Sure, Pet'ka, sure!' 'How about a whole river of vodka?' 'No, Pet'ka. Where would I get a pickle big enough to chase it down with?'"

—Василий Иванович, могёшь выпить литр?
—Могу.
—А два?
—Могу.
—А ведро?
—Не, Петька. Такое только Ильич могёт![281]

—Василий Иванович, ты "барыню" можешь?
—Могу, Петька, могу!
—А "цыганочку"?
—Могу, Петька, могу!
—А "буги-вуги"?
—А это еще что за блядь такая?[282]

Note that the second *anekdot* begins by playing on Chapaev's capacity for drink, but ultimately shifts the satirical focus to a different hero, Lenin.[283] That shift ironically suggests not only the universality of stereotypical behavior among Russians, but also a hierarchy within that stereotype that matches the military/political hierarchy that the *anekdot* mocks.

Again, the film is only the best-known incarnation of Chapaev's renown, which has transcended cultural and generational boundaries. Soviet children played "Chapaev" (a Soviet analogue to "cowboys and Indians") in the 1950s, their imaginations sparked by matinee showings of the film, history textbooks, and the "Chapaev" radio program popular at the time.

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[281] "'Vasilii Ivanovich, could you drink a liter?' 'Sure.' 'What about two?' 'Sure.' 'What about a whole bucketful?' 'No, Pet'ka. Only Lenin can drink that much!'"

[282] "'Vasilii Ivanovich, can you do the Baroness?' 'Sure, Pet'ka.' 'How about the Gypsy Girl?' 'Sure, Pet'ka.' 'What about the Boogie-Woogie?' 'Now what kind of whore is that?'" [Pet'ka is talking about popular dance steps].

[283] Barskii relates a most intriguing legend regarding the genesis of the Chapaev cycle: in the months leading up to the hundredth anniversary of Lenin's birth in 1970, the story goes, the Soviet government nervously (and correctly) anticipated a deluge of jokes at the expense of poor Il'ich. To counter this, the KGB was enlisted to compose and propagate a corpus of Chapaev *anekdoty* that would divert satirical attention away from Lenin. It was said that new Chapaev jokes were appearing so quickly that the poor general was spinning in his grave fast enough to be used as an electric fan in hell (*Eto prosto smeshno* 14).

One of the first avant-garde film groups to form during perestroika dubbed itself *Che-paev*, merging the names of two martyred icons of world revolution. The list goes on: a rock group called The Chapaev Brigade; a 1998 erotic remake of the classic film (Sevriukov 2); a 1995 play by Oleg Danilov entitled *My idem smotret' "Chapaeva"!* [*We're Going to See* Chapaev!]. Two recent films—Petr Lutsik's *Okraina* [*Borderlands*, 1998] and Aleksei Balabanov's *Brat-2* [*Brother 2*, 2000]—explicitly use motifs from the Vasil'evs' film. Perhaps the most famous and idiosyncratic piece of recent "Chapaeviana" is Viktor Pelevin's 1995 novel, *Chapaev i Pustota* [*Chapaev and Void*].[284] Vasilii Ivanovich's face has even been drafted for use on a package of pistachio nuts:

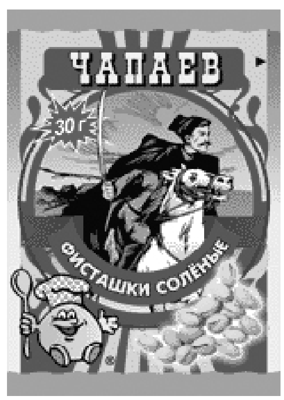


Figure 2. Chapaev Pistachio Nuts.

There were folkloric elements to Chapaev's story and image long before he became *anekdot* protagonist Number One. The first oral genre to be associated with the martyred hero was the rumor: stories circulated long after his death that he in fact suffered only concussive amnesia while crossing the river, and that he lived a long subsequent life, isolated and

[284] The novel was translated as *The Buddha's Little Finger* by Andrew Bromfield in 2000.

anonymous in a remote psychiatric ward (Lur'e, "Zhizn'" 8).[285] A 1937 tale entitled "Chapaev zhiv!" ["Chapaev Lives!"] inscribed such rumors in official Soviet folklore, which also immortalized him in folk songs and legends.[286] Sidel'nikov cites one such legend, entitled "Lektsiia Chapaeva o tom, kak odnomu semerykh ne boiat'sia" ["Chapaev's Lecture on How One Man Doesn't Have to Fear Seven"]:

> В одном бою как-то несколько молодых бойцов побежали было от противника. Струсили, проще сказать. Василий Иванович узнал об этом после боя, созвал их всех и давай им лекцию читать о том, как одному семерых не бояться.
> —Одному хорошо против семерых воевать, — сказал Чапаев. — Семерым против одного трудно. Семерым нужно семь бургов для стрельбы, а тебе – один. Один бугор везде найдешь, а вот семь бургов найти трудно. Ты один-то лежи да постреливай: одного убьешь, шесть останется, двоих убьешь – пять останется... Когда шестерых убьешь, то один уж должен сам напугаться тебя. Ты заставь его руки вверх поднять и бери в плен. А взял в плен – веди в штаб! (*Krasnoarmeiskii fol'klor* 99)[287]

There was even a short film, directed by Vladimir Petrov and starring Boris Babochkin, the same actor who played Chapaev in 1934, entitled *Chapaev s nami!* [*Chapaev is With Us!*, 1941], in

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[285] Vadim Lur'e cites similar rumors about cosmonaut Iurii Gagarin, who was killed in a training accident several years after his famous 1961 space flight. Somehow Chapaev's reputation lent itself to bizarre stories even outside the USSR, including an entry for Joseph Stalin in the 1942 edition of the American periodical *Current Biography* that amazingly informs us that "[Stalin's] first wife, Catherine, by whom he had one son, Chapaev, died in 1917," and that "Chapaev, a captain of the Artillery, received the Order of Lenin" for his service in WWII (796).

[286] See for example Paimen's 1938 collection of folk texts about "Chapai."

[287] "In one battle several young fighters ran from the enemy. They chickened out, to put it simply. Vasilii Ivanovich found out after the battle and summoned them so he could give them a lecture about how one man shouldn't be afraid of seven. 'It's good to fight alone against seven men,' Chapaev said, 'It's hard for the seven. Seven men need to find seven mounds to shoot from behind, but you only need one. You can always find one mound, but it's hard to find seven mounds. So you get down and start shooting: kill one – there'll be six left, kill two – five left... When you kill six of them, the one that's left will be afraid of you. So you make him put his hands up and take him prisoner. Then you bring him to headquarters!'"

which Chapaev makes it safely across the river, where he joins Russian soldiers geared up to fight the Nazi invaders (Muratov 175).

Chapaev was one of the Holy Trinity of Soviet jokeloric fools, along with Shtirlits and the Chukchi.[288] Chapaev *anekdoty* fall into several categories, some of which evoke folk portrayals of the traditional Russian fool (and/or play on features ascribed to "the Russian" in *anekdoty* I cite above): drunkenness; skirt-chasing; language (i.e., Chapaev or Pet'ka's linguistic shortcomings); cleanliness (e.g., "Pet'ka sees Vasilii Ivanovich sitting by the campfire, chewing, and asks him 'Where'd you get the American chewing gum?', and Chapaev replies, 'It's not gum, Pet'ka; I'm washing my socks.'" or "Pet'ka says to Chapaev, 'Vasilii Ivanovich, your feet are much dirtier than mine,' and Chapaev explains, 'Of course, Pet'ka. I'm older than you.'"), and foreign travel (Chapaev in Israel, Chapaev in Paris, Chapaev in Vietnam, Chapaev in America, etc.). The most common motif is linguistic incompetence:

> —Василий Иванович! Шпиона ведут!
> —Документы нашли?
> —Ага, вот на бумаге написано...
> —Читай!
> —А-на-лиз мо-чи...
> —Отпусти, это итальянец![289]

> —Василий Иванович! Гольфстрим замерз!
> —Сколько вам говорить: жидов в разведку не посылать![290]

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[288] All three of these protagonists share a "volume" of the ambitiously titled *Polnoe sobranie anekdotov* [*Complete Collection of Anekdoty*] under the rubric *Anekdoty o narodnykh geroiakh* ["*Anekdoty* About Popular Heroes"], a triumvirate whose juxtaposition helped inspire the cycles I examine in this chapter.

[289] "'Vasilii Ivanovich! They're bringing in a captured spy!' 'Did you find any documents on him?' 'Yeah, there's a piece of paper that says...' 'Read it!' 'U-rin-al-y-sis...' 'Let him go! He's Italian!'" The Russian for "urinalysis" – *analiz mochi* – indeed sounds Italian, due mainly to the ending.

[290] "'Vasilii Ivanovich! [The] gulfstream is frozen!' 'How many times do I have to tell you: don't send kikes on reconnaissance missions!'"

Чапаев спрашивает у Фурманова:
— Кто это там на крыше возится?
—Это Петька антенну натягивает.
—Хмм, Антенну. Красивое имя![291]

На вступительном экзамене по математике в военную академию Василий Иванович получил задание: из квадратного трехчлена выделить полный квадрат. И вот он плачет, а саблю точит![292]

Several specifically Soviet, Civil-War buzzwords are among the alien words that Chapaev mangles, in particular the term "white" [*belyi*, pl. *belye*], which, as is evident below, can imply a range of white objects:

"Василий Иванович, в лесу белые!"
"Ладно, Петька, утром пособираем."[293]

"Василий Иванович! Белого привезли!"
"Сколько ящиков?"[294]

Анджеле Дэвис в СССР очень понравился фильм "Чапаев", особенно место "Вот всех белых вырежем, и настанет счастливая жизнь".[295]

There is a leitmotif in the *anekdot*-al Chapaev's constant misapprehension of language, and indeed in his behavior in general. He perceives the world through a filter of carnality, rather than ideology or military values. His motivations are food, sleep, drink, tobacco, sex, gambling, and the chance to use profanity. Whereas in the film everyday items are invested with military

[291] "Chapaev asks Furmanov: 'Who's that up on the roof?' 'That's Pet'ka – he's up there messing around with [the] antenna.' 'Hmm, Antenna – that's a pretty name!'"

[292] "On the military academy entry exam in math, Vasilii Ivanovich is given the following problem: from a square trinomial [in Russian *trekhchlen*, which contains the word *chlen*, "member"] extract a perfect square. He cries, but sharpens his saber!"

[293] "'Vasilii Ivanovich, there are whites in the forest!' 'OK, Pet'ka, we'll go mushroom picking in the morning.'"

[294] "'Vasilii Ivanovich! They brought [a] white!' 'How many cases?'"

[295] "Angela Davis saw *Chapaev* in the USSR and really liked it, especially the part when they say 'We'll slaughter all the whites and life will be happy.'"

meanings—potatoes represent soldiers and a tobacco pipe becomes heavy artillery when Chapaev is giving a lesson in battle strategy—in the *anekdoty* all military and political categories of perception are constantly re-presented in a different connotational realm, the stereotypical world of the Russian male peasant:

> Василий Иванович говорит:
> —Вот кончится война, Петька, построим консерваторию.
> Петька:
> —И поставим на крыше пулемет.
> —Зачем?!
> —А чтобы консервы не воровали.[296]
>
> Избрали как-то Петьку и Василия Ивановича членами-корреспондентами Академии Наук СССР.
> Сидят они в кабинете, бумаги перекладывают.
> Вдруг Петька и говорит:
> —Ох, Василий Иванович, что-то меня Келдыш беспокоит...
> —А ты его не чеши, болван.[297]
>
> Чапаев и Петька в Испании. Чапаев спрашивает Петьку:
> —Чего это шумят на улице?
> —Какую-то Долорес там ибаррури, а она кричит: “Лучше стоя, чем на коленях!”[298]

This is not to say that Furmanov or the Vasil'evs completely neglect Chapaev’s demographic and cultural background. On the contrary, his simplicity and crude enthusiasm are underscored. The inscribed Chapaev is clearly a *muzhik*, but something is missing; he is a folk

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[296] “Vasilii Ivanovich says, ‘When the war ends, Pet'ka, we’ll build a conservatory.’ Pet'ka says, ‘And we’ll put a machine gun on the roof.’ ‘What for?!’ ‘So the *konservy* [canned food] aren’t stolen.’”

[297] “Somehow Pet'ka and Vasilii Ivanovich are elected members of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. They’re sitting in their office shuffling papers around. Suddenly Pet'ka says, ‘Oh, Vasilii Ivanovich, this Keldysh [name of Soviet politician] is bothering me...’ ‘Just don’t scratch it, you dolt.’”

[298] “Chapaev and Pet'ka are in Spain. Chapaev asks Pet'ka, ‘What’s all that racket on the street?’ ‘Some Dolores is getting *ibarruri*’d and she’s shouting ‘Better standing than kneeling!’” [This joke plays on the name of Spanish-born Communist Dolores Ibarruri, which sounds like the Russian word *ebat'*, “to fuck,” and also on one of the slogans of the Spanish Civil War, “it’s better to die on your feet than to live on your knees”].

archetype corrupted in the service of a value system alien to folk traditions. *Anekdoty* are hyperbolic correctives to that bogus use of his image.

As is not infrequently the case with socialist-realist texts, the Chapaev film was ripe for satirical engagement due to the self-parodic elements in the film itself, in particular sexual imagery. Note Anka's orgasmic reaction to seeing Chapaev on his steed, for example:



Figure 3. Sequence from *Chapaev*

The diegetic resurrection of Chapaev in Petrov's 1941 film for an extraordinary cause—the Great Patriotic War—is a rule-affirming exception among official representations of the hero. Both source texts, especially the film, underscore the undeniable and indispensable, yet ephemeral value of the historical Chapaev, with his primitive, spontaneous brand of Communist enthusiasm. That is, they are careful both to represent spontaneity and to enshrine it into submission. This represents a tactical solution to the problem of what to do with the entropic and visceral urges of the *narod* [the folk]—which were useful to the revolutionary cause—once the revolution was a *fait accompli* and the status quo became something to be defended rather than attacked. The *Pravda* article cited above betrays such a view of history when it calls the film a "crystallized artistic reproduction of our country's past" (qtd. in Taylor and Christie 334).

Chapaev jokes are part of a counter-impulse: to rescue the hero from the pedestal, to liberate Chapaev from both the Civil War chronotope in which he was "crystallized" by Furmanov and the Vasil'evs, and from the abstract epic of Soviet history. The *anekdot*-al Vasilii Ivanovich is a positive cultural figure, a hero (Terts 89). The *anekdot*'s conflation of elite and its putative opposite—drunk, dirty, stupid—is not only to the purposeful detriment of the former, but evinces affection for and approval of the latter. Its signature maneuver is a precipitous demotion of the lofty accompanied by a corresponding elevation of the base. It is not difficult to identify moments in the Chapaev joke cycle where he is reclaimed, co-opted, escorted into a different narrative stream in which it is not consciousness that will overcome spontaneity but, on the contrary, it is marks of spontaneity (and Russianness) such as drunkenness and obscenity, of which Chapaev is a paragon, that are immortal and no match for the limited, ephemeral buzzwords and chronotopes of the constructed Soviet *Zeitgeist*. Nancy Ries writes that this alternative system of values was affirmative: "Mischief, resistance, envy, and roguery have, in fact, been popularly treated if not as unambiguously positive values, then at least affectionately—as amusing, refreshing, spontaneous, and free" (81). What emerges from an analysis of the cycle is an image of Chapaev as a kind of an unwitting spy behind enemy lines, a comfortingly recognizable *muzhik* who drinks and whores and thereby affirms both his gender credentials and his ethnic credentials. In the logic of the *anekdot*, his vices are distinctive ethnographic features that stand out with particular clarity in an incongruous environment.

The same is true of another *anekdot*-al Russian in uniform: the fictional hero of Lioznova's mini-series, *Semnadtsat' mgnovenii vesny*, SS Standartenführer Max Otto von Shtirlits, the cover identity of Colonel Maksim Maksimovich Isaev, a Soviet Army spy living in Nazi Germany. Shtirlits, in the words of M. Timofeev, "plays the role of an elegant German

officer, but remains a Russian man in the depths of his soul" (322). At times the pressure from within that soul becomes so great that Shtirlits cannot refrain from reflexively performing his ethnic behavioral birthright:

> Рейхсканцелярия. Идет совещание высших фашистских бонз. Присутствует Штирлиц. В тот момент, когда пристуствующие склонились над раскрытой на столе картой, Штирлиц наслышно высморкался в занавеску. Голос Копеляна за кадром: "Штирлиц, конечно же, знал, что так делать не принято и потому очень опасно. Но ему хотелось, очень хотелось здесь, в самом фашистском логове, хоть минуточку побыть самим собой".[299]
>
> Штирлица обнаруживают напившимся до бесчувствия и лежащим на полу среди бутылок из-под водки с расстегнутой ширинкой, из которой высовываются красные трусы. Его тошнило, в левой руке был зажат женский бюстгалтер, из правой торчал обрывок записки: "Разрешаю расслабиться. Центр". (Timofeev 328)[300]

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[299] "The Reichstag. A meeting of the top Nazi officials. Shtirlits is there. At the moment when the others are bent over a map spread out on the table, Shirlits quietly blew his nose on the drapes. Kopelian's voiceover commentary: 'Shtirlits knew, of course, that it was not proper to do that, and thus very dangerous. But he wanted, he really wanted, here in the very bowels of fascism, to be himself, if just for a moment."

[300] "They find Shtirlits passed out drunk on the floor amidst vodka bottles, with his fly undone and his red underwear sticking out of it, in a pool of vomit, a brassiere in his left hand and a torn piece of a message in his right that reads: 'You can relax a bit. Signed, Center'" [Center is Shtirlits' Soviet contact who sends him instructions in code over the radio].

Shtirlits is a “carrier” of Russianness abroad.[301] His Russianness is an irresistible internal force, a sort of ethnic Turette’s Syndrome.



Figure 4. Shtirlits

One reason for the incredible popularity of both the mini-series and the *anekdoty* is Shtirlits’s status as an impostor-by-necessity, a basically decent Russian forced to stifle his identity and convictions in public while living in a repressive ideological state. The motif of daily, strategic role-playing found resonance in a society in which there existed a similar incongruity between public and private performances of self. Indeed, *anekdot*-telling itself implicitly parodied the requisite disingenuousness of Soviet social life.

One target of satire in the Chapaev cycle is the premium placed by the authors of the Chapaev novel and film, and by Soviet culture in general, on factography, on the accurate recording and immediate validation of historical facts. For example, Chapaev is recalling a particularly fierce battle:

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[301] In the post-Soviet period, the New Russian would fulfill this “ambassadorial role” in the *anekdot*. I discuss the New Russian cycle in Chapter Six.

> —Направо посмотришь: Так твою мать! Налево посмотришь: Мать твою так!
> Петька:
> —Ну и память у тебя, Василий Иванович![302]

Another battle reminiscence, from Chapaev's diary:

> Был бой, мы выбили белых из леса. На следующий день был очень сильный бой, белые выбили нас из леса. Третьего дня пришел лесник и выгнал всех нас из леса.[303]

Driven from the battlefield by the angry forest ranger, the *anekdot*-al Chapaev, unlike Furmanov's or the Vasil'evs' Chapaev, can move away from the battlefield, away from the Civil War, away from any hope of achieving consciousness, even away from the USSR (see Endlin, *Chapaev v Amerike*). Both the official and unofficial branches of the Chapaev legacy led, albeit by different paths and with different results, to mythic spaces: one to the sterile pantheon of Soviet epic heroes, the other to the carnivalesque, native chronotopes of Anecdotia. The cycle responds to the mythologization of the hero not through demythologizing, but remythologizing him, testifying once again to the presence in Russo-Soviet culture of competing yet interdependent approaches to iconic choreography. A rather different icon—though one similarly invested with symbolic significance by both state textual producers and *anekdot* culture—is the Chukchi.

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[302] "'I look to the right: Holy motherfucker! I look to the left: Motherfucking hell!' Pet'ka: 'Wow, what a memory, Vasilii Ivanovich!'"

[303] "There was a battle. We drove the whites from the forest. The next day there was another battle and the whites drove us from the forest. On the third day the forest ranger showed up and chased us all out of the forest."

6.5. THE CHUKCHI CYCLE: *OTKUDA, ODNAKO*?

Connoisseurs of the Soviet *anekdot* will recognize a 2001 American joke about the only two Russian phrases space tourist Dennis Tito learned during his stay on the International Space Station—"Welcome aboard. Don't touch anything"—as an adaptation of a similar joke from the 1970s about the first Chukchi cosmonaut. Among the canonical cycles of Russo-Soviet jokelore, the Chukchi cycle stands out as enigmatic. When and why did the Chukchi—an ethnic group with a population of about 13,000 inhabiting the arctic northeast of Siberia—acquire their "privileged" position in the *anekdot* corpus? Other famous cycles of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s—Chapaev, Shtirlits, Winnie the Pooh, Cheburashka, etc.—have singular, concrete textual sources in popular culture. Ethnic jokes are told about nationalities with whom urban Russians have real-life contact (especially Jews, Georgians, and Ukrainians). The Chuckhi, however, are relatively scarce in both Soviet cultural production and Russian cities.

While claims made by some that Chukchi jokes are not ethnic jokes at all (Barskii, *Eto prosto smeshno* 195) are excessive, the cycle clearly differs from other ethnic-themed cycles, typically motivated by historical and/or socio-political factors. The *anekdoty* about Ukrainians that have flourished especially in the past decade, for example, are legible as parting shots directed at the closest inhabitants of a lost empire. Jokes about Georgians as wealthy conspicuous consumers, according to Emil Draitser, boomed in the 1950s, when people from the Caucasus began coming to Russian cities to take advantage of a new law permitting the sale of flowers and produce in street markets (*Taking Penguins* 36). Jokes about Jews, of course, predate and outnumber all other Russian ethnic *anekdot* cycles.

Unlike most ethnicities conscripted into jokelore, the Chukchis' history, ethnography, and especially their relations with the Russians are largely irrelevant to the functions and content

of the jokes. Of the 26 nationalities known as the *malye narody severa* [“small peoples of the north”], the Chukchi are the fifth-most populous. Traditionally they are nomadic reindeer-herders or marine hunters and fishermen. The word “Chukchi” is a Russian coinage based on the native word *chavchi* (or *chauchi*), meaning “rich with reindeer.” The Chukchis’ name for themselves is *Lyg'oravetlan* (or *Lugora Vetlat*), “the true people.”

In 1778, after over a century of contact during which the Chukchi proved resistant to subjugation, the Russian empire made peace and began trading with them. The Chukchi also traded with the Americans, Norwegians, British, and Japanese until the Soviets closed Chukotka to foreign trade in the early 1920s. In the 1930s the Chukchi put up a brief but fierce armed resistance to collectivization.[304] In the post-Soviet period Chukotka has suffered from the environmental legacy of industrial pollution and nearby nuclear tests in the 1950s and 1960s, and has experienced grave shortages of heating fuel, food, and labor, especially after the 1998 Russian financial crisis. While economically disastrous, however, the mass exodus of Russian and other Slavic settlers from Chukotka in recent years has proved to be something of a stimulus for renewed emphasis on and interest in local native cultural traditions.

Again, those traditions tend to figure in the *anekdot* cycle mostly as superficial descriptive details and not as targets for ethnic condescension or hostility. In composition and setting, Chukchi jokes are in the tradition of Russian folk *anekdoty* and tales about simpletons (Draitser, *Taking Penguins* 98). Many Chukchi jokes in fact are old chestnuts from that tradition, with the detail of the Chukchi protagonist superimposed. The physical image of the

[304] I have only found one *anekdot* that even hints at this warrior spirit: “Пришел китайский представитель к чукчам: —Воевать с вами будем. Вас сколько? —Человек пятьсот будет. А вас? —Один миллиард. —Тц-тц-тц, однако, где ж хоронить вас будем?” (*Evrei-olenovod* 297) [“A Chinese envoy comes to the Chukchi: ‘We're declaring war on you. How many of you are there?’ ‘About 500. And you?’ ‘One billion.’ ‘Tsk-tsk-tsk, where will we bury you all?’”].

Chukchi contains several elements characteristic of the fool across cultures. He wears a fool's "uniform," with baggy clothing that exaggerates his small stature. He frequently wears distinctive headwear and carries some kind of stick (in the Chukchi's case, a fishing pole, a spear, or a rifle). Draitser points out that the jokeloric Chukchi, like Ivan the Fool, exhibits a naïve and persistent belief in magic (*Taking Penguins* 99). For example:

> Сидит чукча на дереве и пилит сук, на котором сидит. Идет мимо геолог и говорит:
> —Смотри—упадешь!
> Чукча пилит дальше. Сук падает и чукча вместе с ним. Встает и говорит:
> —Шаман, однако! (*Anekdoty o chainikakh* 17)[305]

This is a variant of a venerable folk motif with the traditional "Russian peasant" protagonist transformed into a Chukchi and the "sorcerer" into a "shaman." As in the Chapaev cycle, a common source of humor is misinterpretation or overly literal interpretation of a word or phrase, especially concepts related to modern technology:

> Однажды чукча пришел в магазин:
> —Однако, у вас цветные телевизоры есть?
> —Есть.
> —Тогда дайте, пожалуйста, зеленый. (*Evrei-olenovod* 308)[306]
>
> Чукча спрашивает в кассе Аэрофлота:
> —Самолет до Чукотки сколько летит?
> —Минуточку...
> —Спасибо. (*Evrei-olenovod* 311)[307]

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[305] "A Chukchi is sitting in a tree and sawing through the branch he's sitting on. A passing geologist looks at him and says: 'Watch out, you're going to fall!' The Chukchi keeps sawing. The branch falls and the Chukchi along with it. He gets up and says: 'A shaman!'" The typical speech marker of the Chukchi in *anekdoty* is the word "odnako" ("however"), which he uses liberally, indiscriminately, and ungrammatically. The origin of this detail of the cycle is unknown.

[306] "A Chukchi goes into a store: 'Do you have color televisions?' 'Yes.' 'I'll take a green one, please.'"

[307] "A Chukchi is at the Aeroflot counter: 'How long is the flight to Chukotka?' 'Just a minute…' 'Thank you.'"

Заблудились два чукчи в тайге. Один говорит:
—Стреляй, однако! Может нас кто-то услышит.
Второй стреляет, но никто не отзывается.
—Стреляй еще!

Тот стреляет. Опять тишина.
—Давай еще!
—Не могу, стрелы кончились. (Nichiporovich, *Anekdoty o chainikakh* 19)[308]

He is also sometimes naïvely self-destructive, especially when dealing with technology:

Двое чукчей разбирают авиабомбу.
Прохожий: —Вы с ума сошли? Она же может взорваться!
Чукчи: —Однако, у нас еще есть! (*Anekdoty o narodnykh geroiakh* 60)[309]

Another traditional folk motif common in Chukchi jokes is the bumpkin in the big city.[310] The motif was exploited as a device to ridicule Soviet tropes (the fool's traditional role of speaking truth to power) and to expose as a hopeless failure or fraud the socialist project of enlightening the backwards masses:

Однажды чукча принес в редакцию свой роман. Редактор прочитал и говорит:
—Понимаете ли, слабовато... Вам бы классику читать. Вы Тургенева читали? А Толстого? А Достоевского?
—Однако, нет: чукча – не читатель, чукча – писатель.[311]

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[308] "Two Chukchi are lost in the taiga. One says, 'Why don't you shoot into the air? Maybe someone will hear us.' The other one shoots, but nobody answers. 'Shoot again.' The second one takes another shot, but still nothing. 'One more time,' says the first Chukchi. 'I can't,' says the second, 'I'm out of arrows.'"

[309] "Two Chukchi are taking apart an unexploded bomb. A passerby says: 'Are you insane? It could blow up!' 'We have another one!'"

[310] Draitser takes the title of his book on Russian ethnic humor, *Taking Penguins to the Movies*, from one of these jokes.

[311] "A Chukchi submits a novel for publication. The editor reads it and tells him, 'Well, it's not very good, I'm afraid… You should read the classics. Have you read Turgenev? Tolstoy? Dostoevsky?' 'No,' says the Chukchi, 'Chukchi not reader. Chukchi writer.'"

> Чукча закончил МГИМО и возвратился домой. Его спрашивают:
> —Ну, чему ты в Москве научился?
> —О, я однако, шибко умный стал. Я теперь знаю, что Маркса и Энгельса—две разные человеки, Ульянов и Ленин—одна и та же человека, а Слава КПСС—совсем не человека. (*Anekdoty o narodnykh geroiakh* 61)[312]

So why did the collective Soviet consciousness, sometime in the late 1960s or early 1970s, graft the image of the Chukchi onto an existing folkloric template? The periodic replacement of one joke protagonist with others is a natural process in the evolution of the genre—every generation has its canonical jokeloric idiot—but why the Chukchi?

One not immediately evident reason for the cycle's emergence may be found in the "extremity" (in various senses) of the Chukchi and Chukotka, which were exploited in official texts as well as in *anekdoty*. Geographically, for example, Chukotka is the farthest Russian point from Moscow, over 3,600 miles and nine time zones away. It is also the closest point in Russia to the United States, a fact that itself has inspired at least one *anekdot*:

> Два чукчи разговаривают:
> —Однако, дураком Николашка — император был...
> —Почему?
> —Потому что Аляску американцам продал, а Чукотку — нет.[313]

As one of the most economically primitive and geographically peripheral nationalities in the Soviet family of peoples, the Chukchi were useful guinea pigs on which to demonstrate the effectiveness of Sovietization. As Galya Diment and Yuri Slezkine write, "the 'small peoples' represented the most remote past on the Marxist evolutionary scale. Hence their march into

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[312] "A Chukchi returns home after graduating from the Institute of Foreign Affairs in Moscow. His friends ask him what he learned. 'Oh, I learned a lot,' he says. 'Now I know that Marx-Engels are two different people, Ul'ianov and Lenin are the same person, and Slava KPSS ["glory to the CPSU"; the word "Slava" is also a first name] is not a person at all.'"

[313] "Two Chukchi are talking: 'That emperor Nikolashka [Nikolai I] was an idiot…' 'Why?' 'Because he sold Alaska to the Americans, but he didn't sell Chukotka.'"

modernity and beyond was the most arduous and most heroic of all" (5). The harsh climate of Chukotka added an element of physical heroism to the ideological heroism exhibited by the brave men and women who brought Communism to the "savages." Stories about Chukotka in the 1930s underscore both the bravery of commissars and geologists in Chukotka, and the civilizing influence of Soviet power, especially the exposure of the Chukchi shaman as a fraud.[314]

Another, more visceral reason for the cycle's appearance is phonetic. Several people (Draitser, *Taking Penguins* 82; Belousov, personal communication, March 20, 1999) have pointed out the inherent humorousness of the word Chukchi,[315] which not only has alliterative syllables, but abounds in the "funniest phonemes": voiceless fricatives, affricates, and stops (of which /ch/, /k/, /kh/, and /th/ are especially common in humor). We find the same principle at work in the names of other major *anekdot* cycles: Cheburashka, Chapaev, Vinni-pukh and Piatachok, and Vovochka, not to mention Ivanushka-Durachok. Belousov (personal communication, March 20, 1999) and Draitser (*Taking Penguins* 82) have also suggested the influence of the popular Soviet children's book *Chuk i Gek* by Arkadii Gaidar. As Draitser writes, the Russian lexicon itself predisposed the poor Chukchi to immortalization in jokelore; words that use the syllables *chu* and/or *cha*[316] often evoke absurdity (*chush'*, *chepukha*), stupidity or other undesirable traits (*chuchelo*, *churka*, *chainik*),[317] or simply non-Russianness

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[314] See Mironov, for example.

[315] The singular in Russian is *chukcha*.

[316] This is an international phenomenon, incidentally, which may account for the prevalence of chickens and ducks in American jokes, and the frequency of speech impediments such as lisps in comedic performance.

[317] The popular American series of how-to books, *For Dummies*, is translated into Russian as *dlia chainikov* [For Chainiks].

(*chukhonets*, *chuvash*, and the non-specific slur *chuchmek*, which refers to any Asian in the USSR [Draitser 114]). The word *chukcha* itself has entered Russian slang as simply a term for a stupid person (note this particularly offensive mini-*anekdot*: "Чукча—это не национальность, а диагноз" ["Chukchi is not a nationality, but a diagnosis"]).[318]

Another "phonetic" reason for the popularity of the Chukchi cycle is the stereotypical Asian accent that is *de rigueur* when telling Chukchi jokes. The comic use of this accent was familiar in Russian and Soviet culture long before the Chukchi joke caught on, for example the Chinese servants in Mikhail Bulgakov's play *Zoikina kvartira* [Zoika's Apartment]. This ethnic stereotype was uncontroversial perhaps because it was considered purely comedic, rather than satirical, even in the land of "friendship of the peoples." Ethnic accents could even serve in approved cultural texts as comedic filters to camouflage otherwise risky satirical content (the Georgian accent adopted by Arkadii Raikin to perform Zhvanetskii's monologue "Defitsit," for example). In underground humor, of course, in which the Chukchi by the 1980s was the major representative of Soviet Asians, the accent could be openly exploited to satirical ends, for example:

> У чукчи спрашивают: Чья космонавтика самая лучшая в мире?
> —НАСА, — гордо ответил чукча.[319]

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[318] See Draitser, *Taking Penguins* 82-83 on further linguistic associations of the word "Chukchi" in Russian.

[319] "They ask a Chukchi: which space program is the best in the world? 'Nasa!' [mispronunciation of the word *nasha*, "ours"], he proudly replies."

Or in obscene puns:

> Однажды у чукчи спросили каких он знает послов. “Однако, знаю ‘посол Чрезвычайный’, знаю ‘посол Уполномоченный’ и знаю ‘посол ты на хуй.’”[320]

No discussion of the Chukchi cycle is complete without a mention of a curious, if tiny, sub-cycle: Jewish-Chukchi jokes. The reasons for the emergence of the odd hybrid are both historical and textual. Two images in Soviet unofficial culture closely associated with Siberia are Chukchi and the gulag. Jews in the USSR were a nationality disproportionately familiar with the gulag, and they are the “anecdotal comrades” of the Chukchi.[321] A jokebook published in 1997 makes the link explicit, and includes the following preface:

> Что делает Рабинович в своей страшной чукотской ссылке? Да ничего плохого – он занимается там селекцией: женился на чукче и выводит морозоустойчивых евреев. Есть надежда, что в XXI веке на территории Чукотки будут жить евреи, хитрые как чукчи, и чукчи, доверчивые как евреи. Купите эту книгу. Если вы еврей, то посмеетесь над чукчей, а если вы чукча, смейтесь над евреем, ну а если вы – ни тот, ни другой, посмеетесь над ними обоими. (*Evrei-olenovod* 2)[322]

This excerpt, however tongue-in-cheek, suggests that the logic of the “Chukcho-Semitic” *anekdot* is not devoid of anti-Semitism (or anti-Chukchism, for that matter). Yet the main

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[320] “One day a Chukchi is asked what kinds of ambassador [*posol*] he can name. ‘Well, there’s ambassador extraordinary [*posol chrezvychainyi*], there’s ambassador plenipotentiary [*posol upolnomochennyi*], and there’s *posol ty na khui*’” [mispronunciation of *poshel ty na khui*, “fuck off”].

[321] Also worth mentioning in this regard is Stalin’s 1934 establishment of the Jewish Autonomous Region of Birobidzhan in remote Siberia, and the recent election of the oligarch Roman Abramovich as governor of Chukotka.

[322] “What is Rabinovich doing during his terrible exile in Chukotka? Nothing bad: he married a Chukcha woman and is breeding frost-resistant Jews. We can hope that in the 21st century Chukotka will be inhabited by Jews as crafty as Chukchi and Chukchi as trusting as Jews. Buy this book. If you're a Jew, you'll laugh at the Chukchi, if you're a Chukchi, laugh at the Jews, and if you're neither one nor the other, you can laugh at both of them.”

impulse for the forced cohabitation of the two nationalities in post-Soviet jokelore seems to be the concentration of incongruities between the stereotypes of the two groups: dumb/smart, rural/urban, uneducated/intellectual, Asian/Western.[323]

In a sense, the comment above to the effect that urban Russians having no contact with Chukchi is false; the "fool" in the late twentieth century still comes to the city and is immortalized in folk humor, but he does so electronically, via mass media images. By far the most sustained depiction of the Chukchi in Soviet mass culture, and a catalogue of stereotypes that later informed the *anekdot* cycle, is Vitalii Mel'nikov's 1966 film *Nachal'nik Chukotki* [The Head of Chukotka],[324] about a young revolutionary who comes to Chukotka in 1922 as the scribe of a Bolshevik commissar, but who has to take on the responsibilities of being the only representative of Soviet power in Chukotka himself (and becoming the eponymous "head of Chukotka") when the commissar dies of typhoid en route.[325] Despite Mel'nikov's extended treatment of the Chukchi theme, the most immediate impetus for the Chukchi joke cycle was almost certainly a 1972 pop song by a singer named Nikolai (a.k.a. Kola) Bil'dy (refrain: "Самолет—хорошо, а олени лучше-е-е!" [An airplane's good, but reindeer are better!"]).[326]

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[323] Draitser writes that the Chukchi is "an 'anti-Jew' of sorts" (*Taking Penguins* 88).

[324] A much earlier film that depicts Chukchi life is Sergei Gerasimov's *Semero Smelykh* [*The Bold Seven,* 1936], about a group of Communist Youth League members on a mission in Chukotka. The film has few images of the native population of Chukotka, but they are characteristic of Soviet representations of Chukchi: a large clan living in a dark, smoke-filled igloo (Chukchi actually traditionally lived in hide tents called *iarangi*), waiting for a plane to appear and bring the Soviet doctor to save a dying man.

[325] An intriguing connotational association of the term *nachal'nik Chukotki*—though possibly a red herring—is reported in a 1901 ethnographic description of the Chukchi: "Sometimes there is a northwesterly wind that locals call *nachal'nik*... it blows with terrifying force, destroying everything in its path and freezing the blood in one's veins with its icy breath" (Ian'shinova 3).

[326] Bil'dy was in fact not a Chukchi, but a Nanai, another ethnic group of arctic Siberia. On Bil'dy and his

Other images of Chukchi in Soviet culture include the works of Chukchi novelist Iurii Rytkheu and a 1972 textbook of English containing a story that contrasts the charmed lives of the Chukchi under socialism with the misery of the Eskimos across the Bering Strait in Alaska.[327]

The Chukchis' name, physical size, and stereotypical accent contribute to their folkloric image as naïve, childlike simpletons. Inevitably, therefore, there was also a counter-impulse in the cycle: to represent the Chukchi as wise, crafty, or even secretly brilliant:

> Группа геологов пытается вытащить застрявший в тундре вездеход. Мимо проезжает на оленях чукча. Остановился, посмотрел, закурил трубку и говорит:
> —Начальник! Я знаю, что тебе надо! Ставь бутылку водки – скажу.
> —Ишь, чего захотел! И без тебя обойдемся.
> Чукча уехал на стойбище, вечером возвращается, а геологи и вездеход на том же месте. Теперь уже начальник партии подходит к чукче:
> —Бери бутылку, говори, что нам надо?
> —Э, начальник, теперь две бутылки давай.
> Достал начальник вторую бутылку. Чукча упаковал бутылку, тронул оленей и сказал:
> —Трактор тебе надо, начальник!
> (http://rex21.naro.ru/Anekdot/Xukxu4.htm)[328]
>
> На Чукотке, на самом восточном мысе страны, сидит чукча и ловит рыбу. Перед ним всплывает субмарина с иностранными опознавательными знаками, открывается люк, и выглядывает капитан:

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hit, see Parfenov.

[327] E. Rabinovich posits this textbook as *the* source of the joke cycle, a bold yet doubtful assertion.

[328] "A group of geologists is trying to pull their stuck ATV out of the snow. A Chukchi rides by on a reindeer sleigh. He stops, looks at the geologists, takes a drag on his pipe, and says: 'Hey, chief! I know what you need to do! Give me a bottle of vodka and I'll tell you.' 'Get outta here. We'll manage fine without you.' The Chukchi goes home, and in the evening comes back. The geologists and their ATV are still stuck. This time the head geologist goes to the Chukchi and says: 'OK, here's your bottle. Tell us what we need to do.' 'Eh, chief. It'll cost you two bottles now.' The chief gives him a second bottle. The Chukchi puts the vodka in his pack, whips his reindeer into motion, and says: 'You need a tractor, chief!'"

—Ду ю спик инглиш, сэр?
—Йес, ай ду, – отвечает чукча, – но кому, к черту, это нужно в этой дурацкой стране?[329]

The image of the over-educated Chukchi who nonetheless lives a third-world material existence suggests the cycle's function as an oblique outlet for Russian self-satire, as observers including Barskii and Draitser have pointed out.[330] Chukotka in this respect is a hyperbolic synecdoche for Russia. The Chukchi and Chukotka are prominent in the jokelore for the same reason they were used in official Soviet texts: they represent a concentration of extremes—geographic, meteorological, cultural, political, etc.—that amount to a potent metaphor for a range of discursive agendas. The mockery that underlies many Chukchi jokes contradicts images of the privileged New Soviet Man and also reflects an older, deeper national anxiety regarding Russia's self-image *vis-à-vis* the West. Chukotka is to Russia as Russia is to Europe[331]: peripheral, freezing, dark, impoverished, Asiatic, and inhabited by furry, ursine simpletons. In this respect, *anekdoty* about Chukchi are as much defensive as they are offensive ethnic humor; the Russian subconscious ethnos exports negative aspects of its self-image onto a geographically remote Other (Davies, *Jokes* 12). In the past, this Other could be much closer; in the 18th and 19th centuries it was represented by the *poshekhontsy*, residents of the backwater town of Poshekhon'e (immortalized by Saltykov-Shchedrin). In the new multi-national state, and after

[329] "A Chukcha sits fishing on the easternmost tip of the Chukotka peninsula. Suddenly a submarine with foreign markings surfaces right in front of him. The hatch opens and the captain looks out and says: 'Do you speak English, sir?' 'Yes, I do,' replies the Chukchi, 'but what the hell good does it do me in this idiotic country?'"

[330] See Draitser, *Taking Penguins* 94-97 and Barskii, *Eto prosto smeshno* 195, where he writes: "*Anekdoty* about Chukchi do not have an ethnic character, [. . .]. Rather, they present an image of a stupefied, beaten-down people. You know which one."

[331] Draitser points out this ratio (*Taking Penguins* 96).

the onset of widespread cultural uniformity in Soviet Russia, there were no more *poshekhontsy*; the "fooltown" (Davies, *Jokes* 1) to which undesirable traits must be relegated had to be farther away. If the we-say-Chukchi-but-mean-Russian thesis is to be believed, however, that "town" was also much closer to home than it had ever been. In this respect, the Chukchi cycle may well execute a maneuver similar to the one Davies ascribes to reflexive ethnic humor: stereotypical self-representation to preempt stereotyping from without. Yet if Draitser, Barskii, and Davies are correct (I believe they are), the cycle adds a bit of legerdemain that deflects that potential external appraisal towards another group that is (in more ways than one) as remote as can be, but is nevertheless (also in more ways than one) "nashi" ["our own kind"].

7.0. CHAPTER SIX: THE AFTERLIFE OF THE SOVIET *ANEKDOT*

> Анекдот словно хочет, чтобы его на этом самом месте запретили, ликвидировали, и на этом предположении и ожидании – живет. Дайте ему свободу, отмените запреты, и он – сдохнет.
> —Abram Terts, 1978[332]

7.1. POST-STAGNATION DEFLATION

Although the prediction in the epigraph above proved to be hyperbolic, the end of Soviet censorship (and Soviet power itself a few years later), as expected, dealt a severe blow to the cultural currency of the *anekdot*. By the early 1990s, the generic corpus was in quantitative and qualitative decline. The disappearance of an ever-present, monolithic target for satire deprived the *anekdot* of at least the political aspect of what Freud considered a joke's central purpose: to help people "evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible" (123). With the removal of state proscriptions on the pursuit of "pleasure," as well as on free expression, the substantial weight the genre had borne for decades as an outlet for such expression was quickly distributed among other forms. The history of the *anekdot* in the post-Soviet period is inextricable from the history of where humor and satire "went," in terms of genres and media, when the *anekdot*'s formidable discursive potency was deflated by the end of

[332] "It is as if the *anekdot* wants to be banned, liquidated, and survives on this expectation. Give it its freedom, remove the ban, and it will croak."

censorship and other factors. This chapter examines the redistribution of the *anekdot*'s functional portfolio, as well as new mutations in the genre's evolution, following the obsolescence of its taboo status.

The *anekdot*'s value had not been limited to making Russians laugh, of course. As Krongauz points out, most of the forbidden spheres of life for which *anekdot*-telling had previously been a sublimation—independent political activism, ethnic self-expression, and sex—acquired new expressive outlets: political party formation, nationalist movements, and erotica ("Sovetskii antisovetskii iumor" 228). The *anekdot* had also been the use that mass-media consumers created for otherwise useless material extant in the popular consciousness, which suddenly found itself over-stimulated by novel and compelling material.

The *anekdot*'s small size and attention to detail, which had been potent tools for expressing values alternative to those championed in the large, generalizing texts of the Soviet period, lost much of their utility. Such a "trivial," reactive form of expression was not a viable genre-*dominanta* in a period devoid of a clearly hegemonic ideology, and in which many members of the society found themselves searching for precisely the kind of sweeping explanations of reality that were so soundly repudiated by the events of 1991. If the *anekdot* during the predictable and dull news environment of the 1970s had provided an alternative source of information and entertainment—one that focused not on dry production statistics or inflated rhetoric about the brotherhood of socialist nations, but on daily life and Generalissimus Brezhnev's stroke-slurred, eminently risible speeches—in Yeltsin-era Russia the public consumed a constant stream of small news stories with little mention, or even implication, of higher national significance. Indeed, many such stories themselves read as naïve *anekdoty*. For example, a string of reports on the various consumer products (including coffins, watches, and

dildos) given to factory workers in lieu of wages became a sort of tragicomic, non-fiction news miniseries.[333] In a late-1990s cartoon by Andrei Bil'zho, one man asks another if he wants to "hear the latest presidential decree." Bil'zho's quip reflects the increasingly cynical public view of Yeltsin, of course (as well as a certain measure of giddiness at the still-novel idea of democracy), but it also indicates the extent to which the shock-therapy-economics phase of Russian history was an unpredictable discursive free-for-all in which the myriad "speech subjects" that took part in it did not have to rely on concentrated, portable, and ephemeral forms like the *anekdot* in order to express (and entertain) themselves.

7.2. THE *ANEKDOT* IN PRINT

In the late 1980s, no longer confined by censorship to oral propagation, the *anekdot* began circulating widely in published form.[334] The glut of published *anekdoty* initially served a historiographic purpose: they comprised a written record of a lost, underground folk culture. In this respect, *anekdot* compilers and publishers participated in a central project of perestroika: filling in the *belye piatna* [white spots] of Soviet history. Those white spots are part of the realm of the cultural unsaid that I identify in Chapter Two. Perestroika-era joke compilers and publishers were caught up in what A.V. Voznesenskii calls the "pathos of publishing previously

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[333] This phenomenon was, however, taken to its logical absurd in the jokelore: "'Ты где работаешь?' 'В морге трупы обмываю...' 'Платят нормально?' 'Ничего: семь обмою, восьмой—мой'" ("Anekdoty v nomer" 1) ["'Where do you work?' 'I wash corpses in the morgue...' 'Does it pay well?' 'Not bad: for every seven I wash, I get to keep the eighth'"]. The macabre nature of such humor is part of a larger cultural trend that I discuss later in this chapter.

[334] Despite its continued presence in bookstalls, however, the *anekdot* collection has not enjoyed a wide readership for several years now. In a 1997 survey of reading habits among various Russian demographic groups, it was listed as a favorite genre (in third place, after crime novels and science fiction) only among 16-39-year-olds with no higher education (Natal'ia Zorkaia 35).

forbidden texts," the literary counterpart to the many posthumous political rehabilitations of the Gorbachev years (393). Newly mobilized for a project based on "pathos," the *anekdot*'s primary function seemed to change as fundamentally as its primary medium of propagation.

From the beginning, *anekdoty* were published most often by topic, again reflecting the taxonomical approach to publishing the mountains of previously illicit information. The largest and most visible joke-book series was one compiled by Tat'iana Nichiporovich and published by the Minsk publishing house Literatura beginning in 1997. By the end of 1998, there were 40 volumes (350-500 pp. each) and counting, plus numerous small brochures. Titles include (in alphabetical order):

Anekdoty about Alcoholics and Drug Addicts
Anekdoty about the Army
Anekdoty about Bandits
Anekdoty about [religious] Believers and Non-Believers
Anekdoty about Chapaev and Shtirlits
Anekdoty from the Circus
Anekdoty from Computer Networks
Anekdoty about the Criminal World
Anekdoty about Doctors
Anekdoty about Dummies ["chainiki," used here in reference to Chukchi and other Asian peoples]
Anekdoty from England
Anekdoty about English Lords
Anekdoty about Great Personages
Anekdoty about Hunters, Fishermen, and Athletes
Anekdoty about Husbands and [their wives'] Lovers
Anekdoty about the Intelligentsia
Anekdoty from Italy
Anekdoty about Jews and non-Jews
Anekdoty about Love
Anekdoty about the Militia and the Police
Anekdoty about Money
Anekdoty about New Russians (3 vols.)
Anekdoty from the Other World [supernatural *Anekdoty*]
Anekdoty from the Parrot
Anekdoty about Piglet [Piatachok], Il'ia Muromets, and Baba Iaga
Anekdoty about Politicians
Anekdoty from the Restaurant

Anekdoty that Rhyme and Don't Rhyme
Anekdoty about Russians and non-Russians
Anekdoty from the Television Screen
Anekdoty about Vovochka
Black Humor [*Anekdoty* about Blacks]
Laughter Through Tears
Literary *Anekdoty*



Figure 5. *Anekdot* Collections from the 1990s.[335]

Even after the *anekdot* publishing craze began, the genre still continued to exist on the boundary between literature and folklore, in the realm of ephemera: cheap brochures, fliers, and four-page newspapers. The texts of the genre were thus fixed in a less permanent form than other varieties of verbal art. This was in part a cost-cutting strategy, of course, but also resonated with the nature of the genre itself: it is portable, it exists in numerous variants, etc. A variety of periodicals have regularly published *anekdoty*, including even such laugh-a-minute publications as the trade union newspaper *Trud* [Labor] and ultra-nationalist politician Vladimir

[335] From left to right, *Anekdoty o chainikakh* [*Anekdoty* about Dummies], *Anekdoty nashikh chitatelei* [Our Readers' *Anekdoty*], *Sovetskii anekdot* [The Soviet *anekdot*].

Zhirinovskii's party organ, *Sokol* [Falcon]. Some periodicals—for example the entertainment weekly *MK-Bul'var* and the student magazine *Studencheskii meridian*—solicit and publish *anekdoty* from their readers.[336]

In contrast to early-perestroika joke anthologies, in which the jokes were packaged as newly emergent testimonies to the formerly unmentionable (in print, anyway) realities of Soviet society,[337] by the mid-1990s anthologies were more frequently packaged and marketed together with other forms of light entertainment such as crossword puzzles, or as crib sheets to enhance the reader's social skills (a marketing strategy that is also used with collections of toasts, which, like crosswords, frequently appear together with *anekdoty*).

The most recent step in the evolution of the genre has been its tremendous success on the Internet, especially in *anekdot* archives on the World Wide Web.[338] The best-known and largest such archive is Dima Verner's *Anekdoty iz Rossii* [*Anekdoty* from Russia, <http://www.anekdot.ru>]. Verner, a Soviet-born astrophysicist working at the University of Kentucky, is a modern-day Afanas'ev who does not have to be physically present "in the field"—or even in Russia—to collect his texts.

The rise of the *anekdot* and other forms of satire on the Internet was predated by the emergence in the early nineties of satirical television programs such as *Oba-na*, *Ostorozhno, modern!* [Look out! Moderne!], *Klub "Belyi popugai"* [The White Parrot Club] (which featured famous performers sitting around a table telling *anekdoty*, and was hosted by Iurii Nikulin from

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[336] *Studencheskii meridian* publishes the *anekdoty* it receives from readers as a separate series of paperbacks under the title *Anekdoty nashikh chitatelei* [Our Readers' *Anekdoty*].

[337] See especially Borev, *Staliniada* and *Fariseia*.

[338] The joke has recently been challenged as the chief Russian (non-pornographic) cybergenre by the animated series *Masiania* (see <http://www.mult.ru>), which began as a Web cartoon but made the jump to television in 2002.

1993 to 1997), and especially *Kukly* [Puppets], a political satire program created by writer Viktor Shenderovich based on the British program *Spitting Images*.

7.3. RESURGENT PHYSICALITY

The incarnation (and commodification) of the oral genre in concrete written or otherwise recorded forms rehearsed in a way a more general process of "materialization" in post-Soviet culture, which began in a literal sense the moment the USSR was dissolved on Christmas day in 1991, but had a running start. The year 1986 marks the beginning of Gorbachev's liberalizing reforms, a beginning symbolized in retrospect by a specific event: the Fifth Congress of the Soviet Filmmakers' Union in May of that year. The Congress is notable not only for the triumph of the liberal faction of the Union—the first official organ of creative intelligentsia to embrace the nascent openness—but also for an incident at the Congress when a speaker, in the presence of Gorbachev, mentioned the recent nuclear accident at Chernobyl, to that point publicly unacknowledged by the state. One attendee reports that Gorbachev responded to the unexpected exposure of the disaster by silently covering his face with his hand (Irina Shilova, personal communication, June 1999). The government made its first public statement about the accident the following day.

The explosion at Chernobyl is significant in the history of the *anekdot*, as well; the first transcribed political *anekdoty* to be published openly were a handful of Chernobyl jokes included in an article by Iurii Shcherbak in the journal *Iunost'* [Youth] in 1988. Here is one of the best-known texts in that cycle:

> Дедушка с внуком сидели на берегу Припяти и удили рыбу.
> —Дедушка! А правда, что на этом месте стояла атомная электростанция?

> —Правда, внучек. — сказал дедушка и погладил внука по голове.
> —А правда, что она взорвалась?
> —Правда, внучек. — сказал дедушка и погладил внука по второй голове.[339]

The year before Chernobyl saw the beginning of the last official Soviet initiative to inspire a discrete cycle of *anekdoty*, Gorbachev's infamous anti-alcohol campaign:

> Водитель автобуса объявляет: "Остановка 'Винный магазин', следующая остановка—'Конец очереди'". (Petrosian 23)[340]

Both of these vintage late-Soviet cycles manifest a larger impulse: to bring to the public forum critical discourse about the everyday lives of the urban Soviet folk, and to make explicit the links between ideology and physiology, between the Motherland and irradiated soil, between the Party line and the vodka line. These are links that the culture industry had previously worked hard to obfuscate. Reasserting the presence of the body in the social life of the nation was one of the first corrective projects of post-Soviet culture. The newly permissible self-referential variety

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[339] "A grandfather and his grandson are sitting on the bank of the Pripiat River [in Chernobyl] fishing. 'Grandpa! Is it true that an atomic power plant once stood on this spot?' 'It's true, grandson,' says the old man, patting the boy on the head. 'And is it true that it exploded?' 'It's true, grandson,' says the old man, patting the boy on his other head." There were also, predictably, several jokes linking the two-headed eagle, symbol of the Russian empire, to the radioactive events of Chernobyl.

[340] "A Moscow bus driver announces: 'This stop—liquor store. Next stop—end of the queue for the liquor store.'"

of collective discourse had a prominent physical aspect across genres and media,[341] but one popular form, the *anekdot*, had long been a medium for such visceral subject matter (as I discuss in Chapter Five).

7.4. POST-SOVIET (AND POST-POST-SOVIET) POLITICAL HUMOR

Although the political joke, for obvious reasons, had an especially miniscule amount of cultural cachet after the collapse of the USSR, the images of Russian leaders continued to inspire engagement by the *anekdot*. For a time after the unsuccessful coup attempt in August 1991, which thrust Boris Yeltsin into the public eye as the heroic defender of the People against Communist retrenchment, Yeltsin was the subject of sympathetic *anekdoty*, much as Khrushchev had been in the early, de-Stalinizing stages of his premiership. For example:

> Идет I съезд народных депутатов СССР. В зал врывается мужик с автоматом:
> —Кто здесь Ельцин?
> Все дружно показывают в сторону Бориса Николаевича.
> —Боря, пригнись![342]

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[341] Cinema, as a visual medium, not surprisingly reflected the resurgent emphasis on physicality with particular enthusiasm, and not only in the predictable realm of erotica. The quotidian life of the Russian cultural consumer has been a reservoir of symbolic referents around which certain filmmakers have attempted to construct a viable national popular cinema. Popular culture (including advertising) in a market environment seeks to elicit physical responses: sexual arousal, laughter, cathartic tears, hunger or thirst. See the Epilogue and Conclusion for a brief survey of post-Soviet Russian cinema and its place in the resurgent physicality that has characterized recent Russian culture.

[342] "During the first Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR [in 1989], a guy with a machine gun suddenly bursts into the meeting hall: 'Which one of you is Yeltsin?' 'Everyone points in the direction of Boris Nikolaevich [Yeltsin].' 'Boris, duck!' says the guy."

> "Армянское радио так охарактеризовало его [Ельцина] 'спортивное время': ралли на танках, бег с препятствиями, метание серпа и молота". (Romanov 5)[343]

Like Khrushchev, Yeltsin's reputation eventually plummeted, and his image in the *anekdot* was juxtaposed with the images of his predecessors, especially Lenin, whose literally moribund condition became a point of comparison with the current leader as that leader's health drifted southward:

> У ворот Государственной Думы стоят два пикета—коммунистический и демократический. Коммунисты держат огромный портрет Ленина с подписью "Ленин вечно живой". У демократов—огромный портрет Ельцина с подписью "Ельцин вечно здоровый".[344]
>
> Чем Ельцин отличается от Ленина? Капельницей. (http://www.mandat.ru/anek_elcyn_070_080.shtml)[345]

The rise of über-capitalists in post-Soviet Russia, and the concomitant demographic swelling of the impoverished population, ensured that economic, rather than political, categories would dominate the shrunken range of *anekdot* archetypes (see below on the New Russians). Still, an early indication that Vladimir Putin's Russia might see a mini-renaissance in popular oral political humor was the reappearance of the meta-*anekdot*:

> Правительство РФ заявляет, что начиная с 26-ого марта 2000 года все анекдоты про Вовочку считать политическими.[346]

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343 "Radio Armenia describes Yeltsin's favorite sporting activities: 'tank rallies, hurdles, and hammer-and-sickle toss.'"

344 "Two demonstrations are being held outside the State Duma in Moscow: one by the communists and one by the democrats. The communists are holding an enormous portrait of Lenin with the slogan 'Lenin's Forever Alive.' The democrats are holding an enormous portrait of Yeltsin with the slogan 'Yeltsin's Forever Healthy.'" I have also heard a variant of this *anekdot* in which the democrats' banner reads "Yeltsin's Still Alive" [*El'tsin eshche zhivoi*].

345 "What's the difference between Yeltsin and Lenin? The IV-drip."

346 "The Russian government has announced that beginning 26 March 2000 all *anekdoty* about Vovochka will be treated as political."

March 26, 2000 was the day Putin was elected president, and Vovochka is, of course, the archetypal foul-mouthed class clown of Russian jokelore.[347] Those who argue that Russia has entered a neo-Soviet phase might point out this joke's resemblance to one from 1984 about a government ban on all "jokes beginning with the letter 'ch': Chapaev, Chukchi, Cheburashka, and Chernenko." The depiction of political leaders as inhabitants of the same imaginative plane as popular-culture characters is a tradition that is clearly alive and well, and is enhanced today not only by Putin's physical resemblance to an impish schoolboy (and the fact that Putin is also a "Vovochka," a diminutive of "Vladimir") but also Putin's stint as a KGB spy in Germany and his somber demeanor, which have prompted comparisons with another jokeloric hero from the Brezhnev period: Shtirlits.[348] As I report in Chapter Four ("Putina boiat'sia…"), Putin's words have also been enshrined in Russian folk humor, once again via the agency of a recognizable oral text:

> Путин подходит к жене в кровати и говорит: "Буду краток".[349]

Another Putin joke draws on a different traditional genre, the fable, to express popular cynicism towards (or passive acceptance of) the new political system:

> Сидит на дереве ворона —во рту кусок сыра. Мимо бежит лиса:
> —Ворона, ворона, ты политически грамотная?
> Ворона молчит.

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[347] Vovochka is analogous to "Dirty Ernie" or "Little Herbie" in Anglophone jokes, as well as similar characters in folk humor traditions around the world. His name is a short form of "Vladimir," one reason for the comparison to Putin. Other reasons include Putin's somewhat impish appearance (short stature, protruding ears, beady eyes) and past connections between Vovochka and another Kremlin occupant, Lenin (also a Vladimir). On the Vovochka cycle, see Belousov, "Vovochka."

[348] See Lipovetskii, "Prezident Shtirlits."

[349] "Putin gets into bed with his wife and says, 'I'll make this brief.'" Putin often prefaces speeches and other public comments with these words.

—Ворона, ворона, ты на выборы президента пойдешь?
Ворона молчит.
—Ворона, ворона, ты за Путина голосовать будешь?
Ворона со всей дури как гаркнет: “Да-а-а!”
Сыр естественно выпал, и лиса с наглой рыжей мордой и куском сыра во рту была такова. Сидит ворона на дереве и думает: “А если бы я сказала “нет”, то что бы это изменило?!”[350]

Despite the widely reported publication of a slim volume of Putin jokes in 2001, the *anekdot* in print has entered a new period of dormancy. The scarcity of the genre is perhaps a sign of creeping neo-Brezhnevism on the part of the state, a reflection of market forces, and a symptom of a new, less cynical Russian *Zeitgeist*. The costumed buffoon of a carnival culture presided over by Yeltsin, Communist Party leader Gennadii Ziuganov, and Zhirinovskii has apparently given way to austere Putinism. The first phase of the post-Soviet period, however, produced an *anekdot* protagonist whose fame as a comic archetype began to approach that of his predecessors in Russian jokelore: the so-called New Russian.

7.5. THE “NEW RUSSIAN” JOKE: A NEW RUSSIAN JOKE?

Despite its bout of doldrums in the early post-Soviet years, the *anekdot*’s utility as a medium for instantaneous collective reaction to current events and trends was intact, if dormant, and new cycles did manage to condense in the transformed socio-cultural atmosphere. This was especially true as it became clear who the beneficiaries and victims of the transformations were (or, as Russians might say, *kto kogo*). The most productive thematic species of post-Soviet humor is certainly the series of jokes about New Russians, that filthy rich, amorphous, quasi-

[350] “A crow is sitting in a tree with a piece of cheese in its mouth. A fox runs by: ‘Crow, crow, are you politically literate?’ The crow is silent. ‘Crow, crow, are you going to vote in the presidential election?’ The crow is silent. ‘Crow, crow, are you going to vote for Putin?’ The crow caws with all its might: ‘Yeeeees!’ The cheese, naturally, falls out, and ends up in the mouth of the impudent, red-snouted fox. The crow sits in the tree and thinks: ‘And if I had said no, would it have changed anything?’”

mythical social-class-*cum*-criminal-subculture that bore the brunt of popular discontent with the shock-therapy economic policies of the 1990s. The New Russians were not the only fledgling jokelore protagonists of the period—drug addicts and computer programmers, for example, also "enjoyed" ample representation—but the emerging post-Communist wealthy quickly became the *anekdot* entrée *du jour*. The prominence of the New Russian in public discourse and popular culture has diminished considerably in recent years, however, partly because of the Russian financial collapse of August 1998.

From the present historical vantage point, well into the Putin era, it is probably safe to regard the New-Russian cycle as a discrete corpus of texts associated with a discrete socio-political chronotope: Yeltsin-era Russia. The current, second Russian president's consistently high approval ratings (Putin jokes like the pair I cite above notwithstanding) are but the most quantitative indicator of a tendency in Russian society towards ingenuous civic engagement and support for the government, something Russia has not seen since before Yeltsin squandered his own popular mandate remarkably soon after his triumphant ascension to the Kremlin on the cusp of 1991-92.[351] In the "post-post-Soviet" period that arguably began on the first day of 2000, even the New Russians have reportedly become conscientious citizens.[352] According to journalist Darya Aslamova: "There is no doubt that today's 'New Russians' are very different

[351] Among the most intriguing statements of support for the Putin government to date is Zhvanetskii's September 2000 newspaper article "Pishushchemu i pokazyvaiushchemu." Zhvanetskii lambastes the liberal journalists at the television channel NTV—which was on the verge of being taken over by pro-Kremlin interests—for what he considers sensationalistically violent and obscene reporting. He also accuses them of gross exaggeration in their criticism of the Kremlin, citing the absence of Putin jokes among the Russian populace as evidence of the president's competence.

[352] Yeltsin announced his resignation and appointment of Putin as his successor in a televised speech on New Year's Eve, 1999.

from those of the 1990s [. . .]. As I see it, they have become ennobled, cleverer and more experienced. It may sound pompous, but I believe they really care about the fate of their motherland (qtd. in Mozheitov). Aslamova's comments appear in an article reporting an event called "New Russians Day" [*sic*] held at the Casablanca Casino in Moscow in July 2000. The aim of this celebration "was to demonstrate that there are witty and intelligent people among today's 'New Russians' and that they deserve to be called 'New Russians of the 21st century.'" The event included a competition pitting five wealthy Russian businessmen against each other in contests ranging from *pel'meni*-eating and arm-wrestling to "distinguishing cocktails" and "counting cash without looking" (Mozheitov).

The satirical popular-culture depiction of the New Russian, as Aslamova acknowledges, is indeed the image that the rest of the Russian population associates most readily with its recently moneyed countrymen, and the willingness of the businessmen to participate in a mildly self-parodic performance hardly suggests a widespread attempt from within to dispel the negative stereotype.[353] What it does suggest, though, is an awareness on the part of flesh-and-blood rich Russians of their own representation in the popular and/or mass media. That awareness is hardly a recent development (one that might indicate, for example, that the concept of the New Russian has merely been around long enough for media stereotypes and social reality

[353] Dmitry Mozheitov, the author of the article, is more skeptical than Aslamova: "It is unclear, however, how these skills are associated with the intellect and wit allegedly present among 'New Russians of the 21st century.'" The rest of the article is worth quoting in full: "Supporting the event was a selection of show-biz celebrities: Belarus composer Eduard Khanok, who at one time wrote music for pop prima donna Alla Pugachyova, television hosts Lidia Ivanova and Ivan Kononov, Russia's number one feminist Maria Arbatova and poet Viktor Pelenyagre. PR agency representative Kazbek was initially named 'The New Russian — 2000,' but was forced to leave the casino for being drunk and could not claim his prize. Casino chips worth $1,000 and a private dance with striptease girls went instead to a representative of the Yerevan Cognac Factory, known only as 'Sedrak.'"

to begin influencing each other); members of the new economic elite have carefully modeled their behavior and lifestyles on media characterizations of their particular demographic group ever since the post-Soviet renaissance of Russian capitalism began.

Aleksei Levinson writes in an early-1995 article that the nascent capitalists in Russia, much like immigrants experiencing culture shock in a new environment, were at a complete loss regarding their own image and place within society: “They’re new. And not only to us; they’re new to themselves, as well” (“Chego starye intelligenty ne dali ‘New Russians’” 28).[354] There was simply no extant model of behavior for a rich person in Russian society, the elites of which had spent the previous seven decades impugning wealth and its trappings as the marks of the (anti-Soviet) beast (the most recent domestic role models for would-be entrepreneurs were the NEPmen of the 1920s).[355] The newspaper *Kommersant"*, says Levinson, shrewdly recognized the unsure, culturally unaffiliated *nouveaux riches* as a highly desirable—and malleable—readership, and began to publish articles actively constructing a paradigmatic lifestyle for that readership: “thanks to the influence of [*Kommersant"*], the leading factor during the group’s formative stage was its way of life” (“Chego” 29).[356] The newspaper’s editors understood “way of life” to mean not only questions of fashion, interior decorating, and other consumer status symbols, but “detailed instructions regarding all questions of everyday existence” [“detal'nye

[354] Levinson’s article is one of several about the New Russians published together in *Iskusstvo kino* 1(1995). Alexei Yurchak also discusses the role of business publications in shaping the New Russians’ public image and lifestyle (“Russian Neoliberal”).

[355] Levinson briefly discusses the connection between the NEPmen and the New Russians in another article, “‘Novye russkie’ i ikh sosedi po anekdoticheskim kontekstom (vmesto posleslovia k publikatsii).”

[356] Levinson even credits *Kommersant"* with originating the term *novye russkie*, a translation of the English term coined by Hedrick Smith in the title of his 1990 book *The New Russians*, a moniker subsequently picked up by the U.S. media (Levinson, “Chego” 29).

instruktsii po vsem bytovym voprosam"]. Novice or aspiring New Russians could read the newspaper and learn, for example, that a man of means begins the day with a glass of grapefruit juice and the morning paper (ideally, of course, *Kommersant"*) (Levinson, "Chego" 28). Thus a media-constructed profile of a social group influenced its own supposed real-life referent in that group's earliest formative stages. This was free-market Russia's first encounter with the instant media feedback mechanisms and aggressive, targeted image-mongering to which the capitalist West has long been accustomed.

The New Russians' earnest, ostentatious pursuit of the lifestyle described in the media, not to mention their reputation as violent criminals, made them natural targets of resentment on the part of their non-"new" countrymen, i.e., the impoverished plurality of the post-Soviet Russian population. This latter collective, hampered by its lack of economic power just as the vast majority of Soviet citizens had been restricted by their lack of political power, responded to its own powerlessness in a familiar, symbolic form; by 1994 the New Russian had become the latest favorite son in a genealogy of joke protagonists going back over a century.

The use of the epithet "new" in the New Russian *anekdot* reflects not only an ironic adaptation of the Western term, but also, as Draitser writes, an acknowledgment on the part of the *anekdot*-teller of his own "oldness"; Draitser characterizes these "'old' Russians"[357] by their own self-image as people "who, despite dramatic political and social changes, remained true to their perception of themselves as a group—as nonmaterialistic people, much more concerned with cultural and spiritual values than with profit making" (*Taking Penguins* 154). Draitser is, of course, describing the traditional discursive source of Soviet *anekdoty*—the creative

[357] A small and rarely encountered generic sub-species that spun off from the New Russian cycle is the *anekdot o starykh russkikh* ["Old Russian" joke], which focuses on the hapless, unreconstructed Soviet-era everyman, the New Russian's perennial victim in New Russian jokes.

intelligentsia—from whose perspective the New Russians were not merely guilty of theft and violence, but were also morally, culturally, and intellectually offensive. The offense is reflected in the *anekdot*-al New Russian's profound amorality, lack of refinement, and intellectual bankruptcy. In this respect the New Russian *anekdot* resembles Soviet-era *anekdoty* that ridiculed similar traits in high-ranking members of the Party or the *nomenklatura*:

> Художественная выставка в Париже. Пикассо забыл свой пригласительный билет. Его не пускают: 'Докажите, что вы Пикассо'. Он рисует голубя мира, и его пропускают. Фурцева тоже забыла пригласительный. "Но я министр культуры СССР!" "Докажите. Вот Пикассо забыл билет, и ему пришлось ето доказывать своим рисунком." "А кто такой этот Пикассо?" "Все в порядке, госпожа министры культуры, можете войти." (Abdullaeva, "Ob Anekdote" 85)[358]

Part of the impetus for such *anekdoty* was certainly the ongoing affront experienced by the intelligentsia over the fact that the country's artistic and intellectual life was under the ham-handed (and at times iron-fisted) control of ignorant ideologues. This sentiment had deep roots in Soviet society, as the following joke shows:

> Ленин и Луначарский на выставке художников-футуристов в 1920 году. Ленин: "Ничего не понимаю! " Луначарский: "Ничего не понимаю!" Это были последние советские вожди, которые ничего не понимали в искусстве. (Romanov 9)[359]

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[358] "An art exhibit in Paris. Picasso has forgotten his invitation, so he is held up at the door. 'Do you have any proof that you're Picasso?' they ask him. He draws a dove, and they let him in. Furtseva has also forgotten to bring her invitation. 'But I'm the Minister of Culture of the USSR!' she objects. 'Prove it,' they tell her, 'for instance, Picasso was just here and he had to prove his identity by drawing something.' 'Who's Picasso,' Furtseva asks. 'Everything is in order, Madame Minister,' they tell her, 'go right in.'"

[359] "Lenin and Lunacharskii are at an exhibit of Futurist art in 1920. Lenin says, 'I don't understand this at all.' Lunacharskii says, 'I don't understand it, either.' These were the last two Soviet leaders who didn't understand anything about art."

The New Russian in *anekdoty* is analogous to the Communist official in that his financial position makes him a necessary participant in the newly privatized cultural sphere,[360] despite his gracelessness and cultural incompetence:

> Разговаривают двое новых русских. “Ты слышал, Серегу в Питере крупно штрафанули! Врезался, понимаешь, по пьяному делу в лошадь с мужиком!” — “Ну и как он, бедняга?” — “Все как положено – ‘мерседес’ всмятку, а сам в больнице валяется.” — “А тот мужик с лошадью?” — “А что с ним сделается-то, с бронзовым?” (Erokaev 17)[361]

His disregard of Russian culture is matched by his blasphemous ignorance of more universal symbols of reverence:

> Приходит “новый русский” в ювелирный магазин. “Слышите, это, мне крест нужен, чтобы все, как у людей.” “Вот, пожалуйста, здесь у нас золотые крестики...” “Да это, не суйте мне эту мелочь! Мне нормальный крест, грамм на 500-600. Нету?! Так найдите!” В магазине переполох. Все склады обыскали, нашли. “Посмотрите, пожалуйста. Крест ручной работы. Золото, платина. 620 грамм. Высшая проба.” “Ну это, крест неплохой. Слышите, а можно тем же весом, но без гимнаста?” (*Anekdoty nashikh chitatelei* 33: 6)[362]

The New Russian is “new” in that he is intellectually isolated from the past by ignorance or indifference. The type, however, is firmly ensconced in a tradition. The social context was not

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[360] See Levinson, “Chego” 29 on the New Russians’ role as patrons of the arts.

[361] “Two New Russians are talking. ‘Did you hear? Sergei got hit with a big fine up in St. Petersburg! He got drunk and ran into a guy on a horse!’ ‘ Poor Sergei! How is he?’ ‘As you’d expect—his Mercedes is wrecked and he’s in the hospital.’ ‘And the guy with the horse?’ ‘What about him? He’s made of bronze’” [Sergei has crashed his car into the Bronze Horseman, a famous monument to Peter the Great in St. Petersburg].

[362] “A New Russian goes into a jewelry store. ‘Listen, I need a crucifix, you know, like everyone has.’ ‘Certainly, sir. We have these gold crosses...’ ‘What?.. don’t give me this small stuff! I want a normal cross, 500 or 600 grams. Don’t have one? Well, find one!’ The salespeople rush around in a panic, searching the entire inventory until finally they find one. ‘Here you are, sir. A handmade crucifix. Gold, 620 grams. Highest quality.’ ‘Yeah, it’s not a bad cross. Listen, can you give me one the same size, but without the gymnast?’”

the only factor that contributed to the group's jokeloric immortalization; the New Russians' rapidly congealing image fit remarkably well into the existing templates of several different *anekdot* varieties simultaneously, making New Russians worthy successors to protagonists whose representation in popular culture had become hackneyed or even obsolete in post-Communist Russia. Furthermore, the comparatively narrow range of signifiers available to the New Russians (the three or four acceptable models of car, for example) and their uncritical "herd mentality" (Levinson, "Chego" 29) in following the latest trends made them ideal candidates for exaggerated satirical representation, which employs simplistic, primary-color imagery and thrives on irony-deficient targets. The New Russians were also vulnerable to ridicule by virtue of the mechanistic manner in which they adopted artificial models of behavior; recall Bergson.[363]

The New Russians' early (and—in jokes, at least—lasting) image was also marked by its seemingly haphazard eclecticism, indicating their willingness to incorporate an indiscriminately broad array of stylistic, attitudinal, linguistic, and other influences in the interest of developing a functional in-group identity. Their syncretic principles of self-presentation were as apparent in their behavioral code as in their choice of clothing or hairstyles; Ol'ga Bukharkova writes that the New Russians at their zenith operated according to a loose but distinctive moral system ("ideology, even," she says) based on a "mish-mash [*kasha*] of criminal-world concepts, merchant traditions, Western values, Communist principles, and biblical commandments" (28).[364] The resulting image, propagated through the hyperbolic prism of popular culture and

[363] Likewise relevant to the present discussion of New Russian jokes is Bergson's insistence that "laughter must [. . .] have a *social* signification" (13).

[364] Daniil Dondurei lists similar influences in describing the provenance of the New Russians: "[it is a] bourgeoisie that emerged simultaneously from the Party *nomenklatura*, anti-Soviet, pro-Western, and Slavophile circles, the criminal realm, and from people who have never heard of the Komsomol" ("'Novye russkie' idut!" 1). It should be noted that most of the commentators cited here, who discuss the

mass media, had potential associative links with a diversity of existing images in Russo-Soviet culture, and the *anekdot*—a genre in search of new characters—readily exploited those links.

Scholars of Russian urban folklore have largely ignored the New Russian joke, despite its status as the genre's most productive contemporary instantiation. The cycle's lack of folkloric "credibility" partially explains this phenomenon; as data, the numerous anthologies, periodical publications, and Internet archives that constitute the available corpus of New Russian *anekdoty* are less reliable than the material typically examined in post-censorship urban folkloristics: joke collections compiled clandestinely during the Soviet period and retrospective anthologies of Soviet *anekdoty* published since the perestroika era. Since their genesis as a cultural presence, New Russian *anekdoty* have existed simultaneously in oral and written form (perhaps even primarily in the latter), and are thus ethnographically suspect. From a broader, cultural-studies perspective not limited by the disciplinary constraints of folkloristics, however, we can regard the New Russian *anekdot* as a visible, demonstrably influential cultural phenomenon[365] and contextualize it both diachronically, as the latest successful mutation in the rich evolutionary history of the Russo-Soviet *anekdot*, and synchronically, as one of the myriad popular culture forms engaged with the still nascent *dominanty* of post-Communist Russian society.

New Russians as a discrete demographic group exhibiting a discernible measure of uniformity, qualify their "ethnographic" analyses by acknowledging the social, educational, ethnic, and professional diversity among the new capitalists. For my part, I consciously privilege the popular culture representations of the New Russians, leaving the problematic issue of actual human beings to the social scientists.

[365] The reflux influence of the cycle on actual real-life behavior is perhaps best exemplified by an incident reported in the online newspaper www.lenta.ru in March 2000: a fifty-year-old Novosibirsk resident locked himself in his apartment and threatened to shoot himself with a rifle after having been in a fender-bender with the driver of an expensive foreign car, who demanded money from the man ("Posle stolknoveniia").

A key question for an analysis of the New Russian cycle is to what extent the cycle also represents a popular collective critical engagement with mass media images and other instantiations of hegemonic discourse (if the notion of hegemony can be applied to an ideological interregnum as chaotic as that of 1990s Russia). A related issue, also having to do with intertextuality, is what existing *anekdot* cycles, motifs, and protagonists were conscripted in the creation of the cycle?

Visually the New Russian is among the most recognized Russian social types of the 1990s: he sports a *strizhka-ezhik* [flat-top buzz cut][366]; he is clean-shaven; his neck is adorned with gold chains; he is thick (muscular or corpulent) in the torso; and his sports jacket is crimson (the proverbial *malinovyi pidzhak*). He carries a cell phone and/or wears a pager.[367] He and his brethren communicate using distinctive slang, as well as a non-verbal lexicon (most famously, the *pal'tsy veerom* ["fanned fingers"], in which the index finger and pinky are extended, with the other fingers tucked under as in a fist). By far his most indispensable accessory is his car, almost always a Mercedes-600, occasionally a BMW, very rarely a Jeep Cherokee or a Cadillac. He has bodyguards and travels freely around the globe.

[366] The Moscow English-language satirical weekly *The eXile* coined the term "flatheads" to describe young, thuggish New Russians.

[367] He has not necessarily mastered the use of them, however: "Новый русский с удивлением говорит своей жене: 'Мое "тамагочи" беременна!' 'Что?' — 'Смотри!' Жена смотрит на экранчик и читает: 'Я БЕРЕМЕННА'. 'Дурак! Это не 'тамагочи'! Это твой пейджер!'" ["A New Russian says to his wife in surprise, 'My Tamagochi is pregnant!' 'What?' 'Look!' She reads the display screen and says, 'that's not your Tamagochi, stupid. That's your pager!'"].

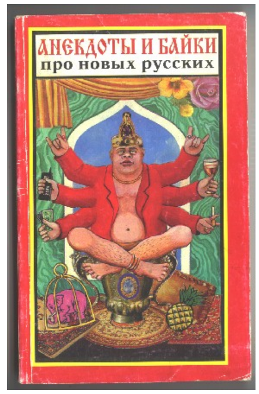


Figure 6. Anekdoty *and Stories about New Russians*

The *anekdot*-al New Russian is a type defined by a cluster of behaviors and accessories associated with a single demographic category: the rich. Other standard attributes of the type—stupidity, violence, drunkenness, amorality—are important, but secondary, even optional, but material wealth is *de rigueur*. The major source of criticism, again, as with *nouveaux riches*[368] in other contexts, is the "old money," represented in the case of post-Soviet Russia by the impoverished intelligentsia, which previously held, if not enormous amounts of material wealth, at least a measure of discursive capital in Soviet Russia and—just as importantly—in the West's image of Russia. It is this intelligentsia perspective that is responsible for the jokeloric New Russian's lack of grace and refinement; the jokes, writes Levinson, are "the views of those who are cultured, but poor, towards those who are rich, but uncultured" ("Novye russkie" 385). Like other national varieties of *nouveaux riches*, the New Russian is not merely wealthy, but incompetently and vulgarly wealthy:

[368] The French rendering of the term "New Russian"—*nouveau russe*—is a play on *nouveau riche*. The Russian transliteration of the French—*nuvorish*—was used before "New Russian" came into common usage.

> Встречаются два “новых русских”. Один другому: “Гля, галстук купил! Штуку двести баксов отдал!” – “Дурак ты – вон за углом такие же по штуке пятьсот!”[369]

The New Russian’s cavalier attitude towards money is often accompanied by a complete lack of awareness that others do not have such wealth. Again, the New Russian is “new” in that he has no historical memory, no knowledge of Russia before the Yeltsin reforms that engendered his type:

> Столкнулись на дороге “мерседес” и “запорожец”. Из “мерседеса” выходит новый русский, плюется и говорит:
> —А, ерунда, завтра новый куплю.
> А хозяин “запорожца” со слезами на глазах:
> —Всю жизнь копил и вот, на тебе, разбил!
> —Слушай, дубина, зачем такую дорогую машину покупал? (Erokaev 24-25)[370]

The image of cars colliding—the most common motif in the cycle—is a transparent metaphor for the collision of old and new. In such encounters the representative of the “old” typically is forced upon threat of violence to pay the New Russian for the damage inflicted, regardless of who was at fault.[371]

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[369] “Two New Russians meet. One says to the other, ‘Hey, look, I bought a new tie! Paid two hundred bucks!’ ‘You idiot! Just around the corner you can get the same tie for five hundred!’”.

[370] “A Mercedes collides with a Zaporozhets [ultra-cheap Russian-made car]. A New Russian gets out of the Mercedes, spits, and says, ‘Eh, no big deal. Tomorrow I’ll buy a new one.’ But the owner of the Zaporozhets says with tears in his eyes, ‘I saved up my whole life for this car, and now it’s wrecked!’ The New Russian replies, ‘Why’d you buy such an expensive car, stupid?’”

[371] The simplistic, crude image of the New Russian extorting or physically stealing money from innocent Russians is in contrast to the white-collar crime that affected many more people: Sergei Mavrodi’s mass pyramid scheme, MMM. There were occasional jokes about Mavrodi: “Судья: ‘Как вы могли обманывать людей, которые вам верили?’ Мавроди: ‘Странные рассуждения, гражданин судья. А как же я мог обманывать людей, которые мне не верили?’” [“Judge: ‘How could you trick people who trusted you?’ Mavrodi: ‘That’s a strange question, your honor. How could I have tricked people who *didn’t* trust me?’”]. There were also jokes based on the aggressive, highly successful advertising

The New Russian in *anekdoty* is not only prone to violence and tastelessly extravagant; he is undeserving of the wealth and influence he enjoys. Often the subtext of a New Russian joke is the implication that he is *ethnically* unworthy. Exacerbating the resentment towards the New Russians is the perception that the worst of them are not Russians at all. The term, then, takes on ironic implications.

An element of the jokeloric New Russian's image that is particularly reminiscent of ethnic humor is his distinctive speech. Predictably, it is judged poorly, especially so because the New Russian is the member of the society who should have the most experiences and impressions about which to wax eloquent, for example, foreign travel:

> Новый русский возвращается из Парижа. Жена его спрашивает: "Ну как там, в Париже?" — "Блин, классно, в натуре... твою мать! Такой ништяк, эта Фефелева башня, в натуре, без базара! Ваще, блин, клево, в натуре! Вер, а ты чего плачешь?" — "Красотища-то какая!"[372]

Draitser writes that many New Russian jokes are "deethnicized" versions of previous jokes told by Russians about ethnic minorities, especially people from the Caucasus (Georgians, Armenians, etc.) and Jews.[373] Levinson and Draitser note the New Russian cycle's resemblance

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campaign waged by MMM, further testifying to the role of the mass media, especially television, in generating folkloric material. On the MMM episode and its relevance in Russian culture, see Borenstein.

372 "A New Russian comes home after a trip to Paris. His wife asks him, 'So how was it over there in Paris?' 'Friggin' cool, I mean, shit, that Feiffel Tower and everything, you know, oh man, I mean, friggin' awesome! Vera, why're you crying?' 'It sounds so beautiful!'"

373 Draitser does not, however, view the cycle as an ironic version of the old racist ethnic jokes, interpreting it instead as a welcome medium for introspection on the part of ethnic Russians: "The emerging and widely popular 'New Russians' jokelore can be interpreted as a sign of a healthy tendency on the part of the Russian group, of a strengthening of the sense of identity by Russians who have begun to look for culprits within their own group, not outside of it [. . .] they now ridicule the stupidity, low culture, criminality, and extravagance of a subset of their own group [. . .]. Thus, today it is no longer only 'the other' who is at fault for the substandard level of living, but also Russians themselves" (*Taking*

to an earlier cycle about a suddenly wealthy group: Georgians and other Caucasians in the 1950s, who began to sell flowers and produce in Moscow and other Soviet cities after the strict laws against private enterprise were eased slightly to allow such activities (Levinson, “Novye russkie” 383; Draitser, *Taking Penguins* 36). Draitser cites the following 1996 joke as an example of the persistence of this image into the post-Soviet era: “A Georgian boy asks his father, ‘Daddy, what nationality am I?’ ‘You’re a Georgian.’ ‘And you?’ ‘I’m also a Georgian.’ ‘And Mom?’ ‘She’s a Georgian as well.’ ‘So, Uncle Otar is also a Georgian?’ ‘No. He’s a New Russian’” (*Taking Penguins* 55). Draitser’s point is also supported by “pre-New-Russian” texts such as the following, which were later recycled as New Russian jokes, with no mention of Georgians:

> Студент-грузин пишет письмо родителям: “Мама! Папа! Я стал уже почти настоящим студентом. Только все студенты ездят в институт на автобусе, а я на такси”. Ответ родителей: “Мы продадим немного апельсинов. Вышлем денег, купи, сынок, автобус.” (*Anekdoty nashikh chitatelei* 1: 213)[374]

Levinson also discusses the links between New Russian jokes and similar jokes about the emerging Jewish middle class of late-nineteenth-century Russia. A contemporary *anekdot* illustrates that the stereotypical image of the Jewish businessman informs the New Russian cycle, as well: “What did the New Russian say to the old Jew? ‘Papa, can I have some money?’” The frequency of Jewish and Caucasian protagonists in the cycle indicates that the use of the word “Russian” in the phrase “New Russian” is often an ironic reference to the perceived usurpation of Russian wealth by non-Russians. The premise underlying that perception is that the elites of a particular society define and even represent the normative image of the society’s dominant ethnic profile.

Penguins 159).

[374] “A Georgian college student writes a letter to his parents: ‘Dear Mom and Dad: I’ve almost become a real student. But everyone here goes to class by bus, and I take a taxi.’ His parents write back: ‘Dear Son: We’ll sell a few oranges and send you some money so you can buy yourself a bus.’”

Despite the well-documented links to anti-Semitic and anti-Caucasian humor, a no less productive way to approach the cycle is to disregard the ironic implications of the word "Russian" and examine the jokes as reflexive ethnic humor; the name of the cycle includes the same ethnic designation as the language in which the jokes are told, after all. The economic sphere was certainly the major locus of attention and concern for the majority of Russians, and for the government, in the 1990s, and the New Russians were not only associated with that sphere; they themselves were representations, incarnations of the altered society produced by economic reforms. The inhabitants of post-1991 Russia are "new Russians" quite literally, insofar as it is a new sovereign state, a "new Russia" (Faibisovich 34). Supporting such an interpretation is the fact that the New Russian sometimes appears as the protagonist of so-called "everyday" *anekdoty*, which satirize not a particular group or socio-economic phenomenon, but a common, recognizable situation (often involving gender conflict) or human foible (e.g., drunkenness, adultery). While the substitution of the label "New Russian" for what could just as well be "a man" or "a Russian" certainly has subtle implications regarding the character of the New Russians; it is just as often a device that serves merely to expand the situational potential of the joke. The New Russian's ability to travel, in particular, has made him a useful protagonist in *bytovye anekdoty* requiring a foreign beach or a famous landmark in a foreign city. There were Soviet *anekdoty*, of course, in which Soviet citizens were depicted abroad (these were both situational and socio-politically ironic, given the impossibility of traveling abroad for most Soviets[375]), but the insertion of the New Russian into the role gives such *anekdoty* a measure of verisimilitude that allows for emphasis on the comedic situation at hand; a New Russian *would*

[375] A well-known monologue by Zhvanetskii, "Klub kinoputeshestvie" ["TV Travel Club," 1970s], satirizes 1970s Soviet television's lame attempt to compensate for the lack of travel opportunities by taking viewers on virtual vacations abroad via their television screens.

be found on a Mediterranean beach or at the Eiffel Tower. Furthermore, the fact that the New Russian abroad is the latest instantiation of a familiar character in Russian popular and mass culture—"our man in the West"—acknowledges his status as the unofficial representative of the Russian ethnos to the world. This is a jokeloric role previously fulfilled by Shtirlits, the Soviet spy in Nazi Germany, or by Soviet leaders on state visits to Western countries. The New Russian's namelessness, however—he is a type, not a personality—also suggests the cycle's kinship to explicitly ethnic (or other group-directed) humor.

The fact that there are very few *anekdoty* about actual wealthy public figures—Berezovskii, Potanin, Gusinskii, etc.[376]—indicates that the New Russian *anekdot* is primarily a descendant not of the nineteenth-century historical *anekdot*, whose protagonists were real-life elites (monarchs, aristocrats, military leaders, etc.), but of the traditional folk *anekdot*, which trafficked in nameless representatives of social types ("peasant," "landowner," "priest," "fool") depicted in a limited number of situational scenarios. In composition and setting, many New Russian jokes are in the tradition of Russian folk *anekdoty* and *skazki* about simpletons. Some are even old chestnuts from that tradition, with the detail of the New Russian protagonist superimposed. The physical image of the New Russian, while not as evocative as other latter-day folkloric Russian dunces, such as the Chukchi, contains several elements characteristic of the fool across cultures: his expansive crimson jacket is a contemporary version of the fool's motley garb. Moreover, the image of the suddenly wealthy Russian who has none of the intangible

[376] There are, however, *anekdoty* (both original and translated) about Bill Gates. In their book-in-progress on the New Russians, Helena Goscilo and Nadezhda Azhgikhina underscore the distinction between the New Russians and the so-called oligarchs.

commodities (common sense, spirituality, ethics) needed to deal with his new material circumstances is akin to that of the "bumpkin in the city," a motif whose most recent instantiation in Russian jokelore was the Chukchi cycle.[377]

The New Russian *anekdot* exemplifies a social and demographic displacement, rather than a geographic one. The New Russian's hapless and crude participation in the capitalist system is also reminiscent of the Russian peasant's first, awkward encounters with the Communist system in the 1920s, a motif exploited most famously by Mikhail Zoshchenko.

As in traditional folk *anekdoty*, and in some Chukchi jokes, the New Russian fool sometimes appears not as a *glupets* [idiot], but a *khitrets* [clever trickster][378]:

> Инспектор ГАИ останавливает нового русского и видит, что тот немного под градусом. "Дыхните, пожалуйста, в трубочку." Новый русскии дыхнул и, соответственно, гаишник говорит: "Вы пьяны!" — "Да нет, я трезв! Я ничего не пил, это у вас прибор не работает! Вон, на жене можете попробовать!" Гаишник решил и на жене попробовать. Она тоже дыхнула. "И жена ваша пьяна." — "Нет, но как же и жена может быть пьяна? Это у вас прибор не работает. В конце концов, вот пятилетний ребенок с нами, давайте проверим на нем." Проверили. "Да и ребенок ваш тоже пьян!" — "Не, командир, да ты с дуба рухнул! Ты чего несешь?" — "Однако да, это я маху дал. Ладно, извините уж." Едут дальше. Новый русский говорит жене: "А ты – вредно ему пить, вредно... А прав-то я оказался!" (Erokaev 19)[379]

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[377] The two cycles intersect in the following *anekdot*: "На Чукотке появились 'новые чукчи'. От старых они отличаются тем, что у них малиновые лыжи и 600 оленей" (*Anekdoty nashikh chitatelei* 33, 5) ["In Chukotka there are now 'New Chukchi.' They differ from the old Chukchi in that they have crimson snowshoes and 600 reindeer"].

[378] On the New Russian as trickster, see Lipovetsky, "New Russians as a Cultural Myth." On the trickster persona and its place in *anekdot* culture in general, see Rudnev, "Pragmatika anekdota" and "Anekdot."

[379] "A traffic policeman stops a New Russian and sees that he is under the influence. 'Breathe into this, please.' The New Russian blows into the breathalyzer and the cop says, 'You're drunk!' 'No way, I'm sober! I haven't drunk a thing! Your equipment doesn't work! Try it on my wife, you'll see!' The cop gives it to the wife, she blows into it, and he says, 'Your wife's drunk, too!' 'How can my wife also be drunk? It's your equipment. It doesn't work. Try it one more time, on my five-year-old son, here in the

Occasionally the New Russian trickster even demonstrates his adroitness and understanding of the new economic system:

> Заходит “новый русский” в банк в Женеве и спрашивает, можно ли ваять заем по “мерседес”. Клерки, недоуменно переглянувшись, кивают и в свою очередь спрашивают, о какой сумме идет речь. “Сто долларов, — следует ответ, — на год”. Ровно через год “новый русский” возвращается, платит положенные пятнадцать долларов (годовой процент) и садится в машину. “О, сэр, — хором выдыхают клерки, — объясните, в чем же дело?!” — “Ха, — бросает “новый русский”, включая зажигание, — где еще я найду такую охраняемую стоянку всего за пятнадцать баксов?” (Gopman and Mil'china 381)[380]

If the implication of Soviet jokes was that the Russian character (to which Ries attributes a wide streak of mischievousness and an urge to be a “spoiler” [65-71]) is poorly suited for Communism, then the implication of most New Russian jokes is that this character is equally out of place under capitalism. It is perhaps this *cul de sac* of cynicism that is the most serious obstacle to the cycle’s continued productivity, and the reason that, as Mark Lipovetsky writes, the New Russian *anekdot* has been substantially “replaced by [. . .] more psychological approach[es] to the enigma of the new class,” such as prose fiction (“New Russians as a Cultural Myth” 56).

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back seat.’ The cop administers the test to the boy. ‘Your child is drunk, too!’ ‘Uh-uh, officer. You’re off your nut! What are you saying?’ ‘All right, my mistake. I apologize.’ He lets them go. After they pull away, the New Russians says to his wife, ‘And you said drinking’s bad for him, but it turns out I was right!’”

[380] “A New Russian goes into a bank in Geneva and asks whether he can take out a loan using his Mercedes as collateral. The clerks hesitate, nod, and ask what amount. ‘A hundred dollars,’ the New Russian replies, ‘for one year.’ One year later to the day, the New Russian comes back, pays the fifteen per cent interest (for a year) and gets into his car. ‘Oh, sir,’ the clerks yell after him, ‘can you explain why you did that?’ ‘Ha,’ says the New Russian, turning on the ignition, ‘where else’ll I find a secure parking spot for a year for fifteen dollars?’”

Another cultural sphere that generated multiple representations of the New Russian—and a sphere with strong links to the *anekdot* in Soviet culture—is cinema, though the two media did not conspire to produce the new archetype. A factor in the overall decline of the *anekdot* in the 1990s, in fact, was surely the paucity of material from domestic popular movies, one of the *anekdot*'s main sources of characters and motifs during the preceding decades.

The New Russian *anekdot* certainly found no prototypes on the silver screen; the cinematic New Russian has had little influence on his jokeloric counterpart. The New Russian in films is often a caricature, but rarely comic or even productively risible. While the profoundly cynical *anekdot* offers little possibility of social reform or redemption—the New Russian in the Mercedes will always be a threat to the *muzhik* in the Zaporozhets—cinema more than once has taken a revisionist view of stereotypical post-Soviet class relations. One of the first cinematic portrayals of the New Russian takes a straightforward, contemporary-drama approach to the new socio-economic environment and its emerging character types. Denis Evstigneev's *Limita* [Limits, 1994] is a simplistic modern tragedy that shows the ultimately lethal effects of the New Russian lifestyle's culture of violence. The wealthy, cynical protagonist of the film is indirectly responsible for the mistaken-identity murder of his old friend, who has retained his integrity and refused to participate in the new, shady economy. The implication at the end of the film is that the New Russian has learned a lesson, and will begin to fly straight. In Villen Novak's *Printsessa na bobakh* [Princess on a Hill of Beans, 1997], for example, the New Russian protagonist is the romantic hero, a positive and sympathetic figure. Such portrayals underscore

the differences between urban folk culture and the culture industry; unlike publishing and film production, the *anekdot* does not have a profit margin, thus no allegiance to wealthy Russians themselves that might soften its critical perspective.[381]

Several recent films elevate the *anekdot*-al New Russian's perennial victim—the poor *muzhik*—to dominant, even heroic status. The protagonist of Alla Surikova's *Khochu v tiur'mu!* [I Want to Go to Prison!, 1999], for instance, is a simple, working-class, Zaporozhets-driving Russian man, but not a typical *muzhik*; he uses his formidable technical skills to soup up the much maligned car to such a degree that he leaves any Mercedes in the dust. His victory in an impromptu road rally[382] impresses the defeated New Russian, who offers our hero a job that turns out to be illegal, forcing him to flee (in his Zaporozhets, naturally) to the Netherlands to avoid repercussions at home. He eventually drives triumphantly back to Russia and his simple, noble life, the lowly car's reliability and stamina a contrast to the flashy, ephemeral speed of the Mercedes. Another film, Petr Lutsik's dark comedy, *Okraina* [Borderlands, 1998], depicts a different sort of lower-class victory over New Russians; the finale features three peasants from the Ural mountains murdering a sinister Moscow oil executive in his office and then leaving the high-rise building—and all of Moscow—in flames. A third film, Stanislav Govorukhin's *Voroshilovskii strelok* [Sharpshooter of the Voroshilov Regiment, 1998], depicts redemptive, righteous violence towards New Russians in a much less stylized way; the hero, a WWII veteran, creatively emasculates his granddaughter's unrepentant rapists one by one with his sharpshooter's rifle. Such motifs hark back to traditional folk *anekdoty* depicting clashes

[381] See Dondurei, "Kinematografisty o 'novykh russkikh,'" for a discussion of New Russians within the creative intelligentsia.

[382] In the summer of 2001, *The eXile* organized a cross-country Zaporozhets rally modeled on the Paris-Dakar rally.

between the peasant and the landowner, the priest, or other representatives of the elite. The jokeloric conflict between the New Russian and the *muzhik* is also in the Russian literary tradition of the "little man" and his encounters with representatives of power.

Another recent impulse has drawn on public nostalgia. Several recent films and television productions have depicted victories over modern Russia's greed, cynicism, and violence of characters played by film icons of the 1960s and 1970s, including Mikhail Ul'ianov (who played Lenin six times and Marshal Zhukov twelve times); Nonna Mordiukova; Viacheslav Tikhonov (who played the immortal Shtirlits); Liudmila Gurchenko; Liia Akhedzhakova; and Oleg Efremov.[383] The "Russian project" television PSA series is also in this vein, featuring many of the same actors as average Russians doing culturally specific, everyday things and concluding with such encouraging slogans as "everything's going to be OK," "this is my city," and—in an implicit challenge to the New Russians—"I live in Russia, too."

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[383] Ul'ianov starred in the above-mentioned *Voroshilovskii strelok* and (with Efremov and Tikhonov) in Sergei Ursuliak's *Sochinenie ko dniu pobedy* [A Fantasy for Victory Day, 1997]. Mordiukova played the title role in Denis Evstigneev's *Mama* (1999). Gurchenko and Akhedzhakova starred in El'dar Riazanov's *Starye kliachi* [Old Jades, 2000].

8.0. EPILOGUE AND CONCLUSION

The *anekdot*'s recent decline, as I explain in Chapter Six, is partially due to the explosion of available genres—humor delivery systems—that began with the literal explosion at Chernobyl's reactor # 4 in April 1986. The softening of irony as a mode of representation, and the move from sharp satire to a lighter form of irony and to nostalgia, are also indicative of the *anekdot*'s overall crisis. The marketing of Soviet nostalgia in contemporary Russia curiously suggests a view of nostalgia as something edible or potable; a number of Moscow restaurants and bars have names or themes taken from Soviet-era culture, especially popular films of the Stagnation period: Beloe solntse pustyni, Mesto vstrechi, Kavkazskaia plennitsa, Garazh.[384] There is also Café Petrovich (a Stagnation-themed restaurant owned by cartoonist Andrei Bil'zho) and Café Anekdot. Kitsch, that satisfying blend of nostalgia and irony, informs other products, as well, including a brand of condoms called "Van'ka-vstan'-ka" ["Get up, Ivan!"] and the Chapaev pistachio nuts I mention in Chapter Five. A more collective, national nostalgia, for different Russian pasts, is evident in such brand names as Imperial Bank, the New Russians' favorite newspaper *Kommersant"* (written in pre-Soviet orthography), the Revolutionary Vodka Bar, and Emel'ian Pugachev mustard. A cynic might say: those who do not understand the past are doomed to eat it, but the

[384] The names are taken from the following films: Vladimir Motyl''s *Beloe solntse pustyni* [White Sun of the Desert, 1969], Stanislav Govorukhin's *Mesto vstrechi izmenit' nel'zia* [The Meeting Place Cannot be Changed, 1979], Leonid Gaidai's *Kavkazskaia plennitsa* [Prisoner of the Caucasus, 1966], and Riazanov's *Garazh* [Garage, 1979].

consumable nostalgia trend can be contextualized in that same renaissance of material life as a cultural category, and also testifies to a shift in prevailing domestic popular views of Russo-Soviet culture itself. That shift is nowhere more apparent than in recent Russian cinema, where the self-referential impulse in Russian cultural production has asserted itself in rather different ways from the virtually masochistic displays I discuss above.

One prominent revision of the gratuitous excess and Westernization characteristic of the post-Soviet age is Aleksei Balabanov's *Brat-2* [Brother 2], in which the brute violence that is customary in the action film is sent abroad in the service of national pride. Danila, the action hero, is the anti-Shtirlits: a lethal, patriotic Russian in the West who has no interest in culture, does not conceal his identity, and does not learn the local language. He goes to America as a Russian Rambo, his function on screen, like Rambo's, to avenge a personal offense that is a metaphor for a national humiliation.[385] While behind enemy lines, Danila finds the time to rescue a Russian prostitute, an economic POW (underscored by her shaved head). The defining piece of dialogue in the film comes near the end: an American woman asks Danila and the rescued prostitute, "Are you gangsters?", to which the prostitute replies, "No, we're Russians," thus definitively rebutting the Western conflation of the two (Russians = gangsters), a conflation that originated in the same historical context as the image of the New Russian.

"We're not gangsters, we're Russians" is a sentiment that informs a very different text, Nikita Mikhalkov's 1998 blockbuster, *Sibirskii tsiriul'nik* [The Barber of Siberia], the marketing slogan of which—"He's Russian. That explains a lot"—is a kind of paraphrase of Balabanov's "gangster" line. Mikhalkov envisioned his epic film as both a needed dose of hope and national pride for domestic audiences and a quality export that rebutted international representations of

[385] The film also explicitly references a native cinematic hero: Chapaev.

Russia. In several speeches in 1998 and 1999, Mikhalkov castigated his fellow directors for their negative portrayals of Russia, accompanying his comments with a "highlights reel" of particularly egregious examples of celluloid slander. His was also one of the loudest voices in the chorus of criticism directed at negative depictions of Russia in the foreign media, for example the scene in the film *Armageddon* in which a drunken cosmonaut is repairing a space station with a monkey wrench, or the Swedish Red Cross commercial that showed a series of successively smaller *matreshki* [Russian wooden nesting dolls], culminating in a small, black coffin at the center and the caption HELP THE RUSSIAN PEOPLE.

Although Mikhalkov was taking offense, and aim, at a pattern of self-criticism that (as I argue in Chapter Five) had had a significant presence in Russian popular culture for decades, the director's particular grievance was based on a more specific trend. That trend, in fact, has been one of the most persistent features of Russo-Soviet cinema since the Fifth Congress, and can be succinctly described in one word: *chernukha*, the pejorative label (based on the Russian word for "black") that has been applied to a large and varied list of films since the late 1980s.[386] *Chernukha* appeared on screens at a time when all aspects of the Soviet experience were ripe for public exposé and condemnation. *Chernukha* was the most radical visual manifestation of de-Sovietization, a display of visceral excess analogous to the emotional excess of melodrama, another mode of representation whose emergence was precipitated by a period of social crisis. *Chernukha* emphasizes with graphic naturalism and hermetic pessimism Russia's social ills and

[386] The term was initially applied to dark-themed prose fiction.

historical abscesses: crime, poverty, filth, ugliness, disease, desperation, drug abuse, drunkenness, cruelty, and violence. It depicts unremitting suffering and unmotivated harm to selves and others in unfiltered, uncontextualized contemporary settings.[387]

Mikhalkov's film is an almost programmatic anti-*chernukha* text. It has exquisite production value and offers an aggressively coherent narrative, and just to be safe includes within it several events with their own narrative structures: a ball, a Shrovetide celebration, an opera. Well-placed outbursts of irrational, spontaneous behavior are OK, but they are ultimately justified by a code. The value of such outbursts is their service to the national enigma. There is no depiction of unstructured time, loitering, unmotivated activity, or uncontextualized quotidian behavior. The film does contain, however, four scenes of physical violence and four scenes of drinking, two elements that are de rigueur in *chernukha* cinema, and which are therefore problematic in a film conceived so militantly against *chernukha* imagery. *Sibirskii tsiriul'nik* engages the stereotype of the Russian as an impetuous, belligerent drunk by impeccably motivating its drinking and violence. The violence is unambiguously contextualized: a revolutionary terrorist bombing, the ritual fist-fighting of Shrovetide, a saber duel, and a violin-bow thrashing, the last two over a woman's honor. The drinking scenes are also highly contextualized, both in the narrative structure and in the larger cultural traditions they depict. Two of them involve men bound by chivalry to drink with the heroine or to her health. The third is a toast made by the tsar (Aleksandr III, played by Mikhalkov himself) to military cadets upon

[387] The *anekdot* itself has recently turned towards the kind of macabre darkness favored by other media in the late Soviet period: cycles about such catastrophes as the Kursk submarine accident, the deadly terrorist takeover of a Moscow theater in 2002, the death of actor Sergei Bodrov, Jr., and even the September 11 attacks.

graduation. The final appearance of alcohol is in a wine glass that the heroine, an American hussy, picks up as an accessory for her attempted seduction of the chaste, petrified Russian hero, Andrei.

The director's project in these scenes is an aggressive recovery and recodification of culturemes that have, in his opinion, been abused and squandered by post-Soviet filmmakers, but which cannot be ignored because their undeniable appeal to the Russian filmgoer makes them indispensable elements in the nascent popular cinema. The display of these culturemes is not a mere phenomenological (or ethnographic) spectacle, however; the central image of the Shrovetide celebration, for example, is a rehearsal in cinematic form of Mikhalkov's expository criticisms of *chernukha* cinema. If the fighting and drinking and other mischief that is allowed, even prescribed, in the days before Lent represent a last hurrah before a necessary period of abstention, atonement, and anticipation of a coming rebirth, *chernukha* cinema, the implication goes, irresponsibly represents a perpetual state of carnival, an endless brawl, permanent promiscuity, an eternal bender.

The rejection of generic or other representational conventions that characterized *chernukha* was a symptom of a kind of aesthetic nihilism. Useful for a broad cultural reading of *chernukha* and the polemic surrounding it is Peter Brooks' concept of the "moral occult," which he defines as "the domain of operative spiritual values which is both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality [. . .], the repository of the fragmentary and desacralized remnants of sacred myth" (5). In the specific case of perestroika-era Russia, many viewed the recovery of pre-Soviet values, aggressively "desacralized" for 70+ years, as an attempt to access just such a "domain." Mikhalkov and others saw in *chernukha* an equally aggressive, all-encompassing "desacralizing" influence, and thus a menace.

In *Dark Cinema,* John Tuska describes American film noir as "a movement toward negation [. . .] the result [. . .] of a confrontation with nihilism" (xvi). The genre enacts the cultural collective's psychological distress caused by its traumatic awareness of modern society's loss of values. Although there are of course essential and profound differences between noir and *chernukha*, the notion of a cinematic response to the perception of chaos and nihilism is shared by both. Tuska does not cite Freud or Lacan, but the process he describes resembles the psychoanalytical concept of lack, the awareness of which is so painful it is disavowed by the subject and compensated for by the adoption of a fetish object that both hides and marks the site of lack. At the risk of being accused of the worst kind of *chernukha*—negative interpretations of Russia by a foreigner—I would point out that the cultural self-consciousness of the Russian creative intelligentsia in the 1990s was crucially influenced by a confrontation with material and intellectual lack: socio-economic disaster and ideological interregnum. *Chernukha* suspends the process described by psychoanalysis at the point of realization of lack, at the site of the wound, and thus rejects the disavowal that preserves psychic integrity. Put in artistic terms, *chernukha* precludes the tragic catharsis that has traditionally validated dark art.

The post-socialist-realist dilemma of representation grew out of the fact that so many words and other signs had been so compromised by their ideological encoding that all signifying activity was suspect. Despite socialist realism's claims of maximum verisimilitude, official representations of contemporary life were in fact marked by a maximum semantic distance between text and referent. While the *anekdot* had thrived by ironically emphasizing such gaps, *chernukha* exposed the distance by collapsing it, eschewing cinematic devices and even such basic principles of narrative as motivation. The *chernukha* impulse was just that—impulsive, unfiltered, unreflective reproduction of social reality. *Chernukha* has been called a "free play of

signifieds" (Vladimir Padunov, personal communication, April 21, 2001). It signaled a breakdown or an implied obsolescence of artistic devices and imagery, even of metaphor itself as a mode of representation.

Mikhalkov's enthusiastic aestheticization of Russian history and culture has not been the only textual response to the nihilistic pulverizing of "fragmentary and desacralized remnants" of pre-post-Soviet myths, tropes, and representational strategies. Recent cultural production in Russia has, in fact, been characterized by attempts to negotiate two discredited approaches to representation: the uncontextualized, anti-metaphorical soup of signifieds of early-post-Soviet *chernukha* texts, on the one hand, and the naïvely postmodern,[388] floating signifiers of socialist realism, on the other. In this regard, a significant impulse apparent in Russian filmmaking since the middle of the "post-ideological" 1990s has been the recovery of everyday culturemes (objects and behaviors) as abstract values in and of themselves. Aleksandr Rogozhkin's *Osobennosti natsional'noi okhoty v osennii period* [Particularities of the National Hunt in Autumn, 1995] and its sequels, for example, offer a mundane, even profane view of Russianness, a comedic paean to the minute rituals of everyday life, of the *malaia rodina* [little Motherland], with its comforting and affirmative little-v values and little-t traditions. Vodka has been the dominant cultureme in these films. Rogozhkin depicts vodka as a sort of Tao, an omni-motivation for human behavior and discourse, as the ether in which latent Russianness is manifested and performed.

Vodka has been fetishized with a market awareness by cultural producers. Among the various definitions of fetish, vodka in Russian culture most resembles the broad, traditional, anthropological understanding of a fetish as an inanimate object imbued by its possessor with a

[388] See Epstein, "The Origins and Meaning of Russian Postmodernism."

value that far exceeds (or is independent from) the object's material existence. Ray Browne calls fetishes "objects of special devotion." The fetishization of vodka in Russian cultural representations (folklore, literature, film) serves to over-legitimize the Russian subject's desire for it. If, as Freud believes, the fetishized image of a woman helps the male disavow his inner homosexual, the fetishized image of vodka can help the consumer of that image disavow his inner drunk. The desire in question is complex in a different way from sexual desire. It does not coincide with Freud's concept of fetish as adequately as, say, the hard bodies and soft interiors of cars in American culture. An important difference is that a sexual fetish, even through the filter of one or more layers of representation, can be an agent for actual, physical gratification of the subject's desire. Non-sexual fetishes—if there are such things—cannot. Representations of cash cannot help the money fetishist become wealthy. Representations of food cannot satisfy the fetishist's desire for that food. Indeed, such representations serve only to increase that desire (the fundamental premise of advertising). Thus, non-sexual fetishes, especially when constructed for the potential fetishist by a self-interested third party (advertisers), often substitute sexual desire for a different kind of desire in order to make the latter more compelling and potent.

The fetishizing of vodka in Russian culture also seeks to substitute one form of desire for another, namely the desire to participate in the national culture for the physical desire for alcohol. The representational fetishization of vodka ascribes a specific value and meaning to the desire for vodka, which in turn affects the subject's behavior and attitude towards the object of that desire, and effectively mitigates the guilt (and risk) associated with it. The vodka desire in Russian cultural representations has had, on balance, a positive valence, even during Soviet times. In fact, the virtues of vodka have been so successfully represented that the opposite

belief—that vodka is an evil that should be withheld from society and the individual—is marked as aberrational (unmasculine, un-Russian) (again, I refer you to jokes about Gorbachev's temperance campaign).

As I have tried to demonstrate in the preceding chapters, the *anekdot* was itself a marker of a lack—the severe paucity of ingenuous public discourse in Soviet culture—as well as an "object of special devotion" for millions. As a fetish-genre, the Russo-Soviet *anekdot*, like the unearthed fetish objects of extinct civilizations,[389] has become something of a museum piece in the absence of the cultural context that engendered and empowered it. From the present vantage point, however, the *anekdot* corpus represents one of the most distilled, yet multifarious documents of that context. It was substantially the genre's variegated provenance and multi-functionality over the previous centuries that made its twentieth-century instantiation a form of expression supremely adaptable to the changing socio-political contexts and symbolic regimes in which it circulated. Simultaneously independent from and parasitically attached to mass cultural production and other authoritative discourse, the *anekdot* served as a template for an alternative, satirical, reflexive, collective voiceover narration of the Soviet century.

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[389] Freud, it is worth noting, was an avid collector of such objects, which he called "my old and dirty gods" (Sigmund Freud Museum website).

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